

# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Postmodernism

Serialism

Wallace Berry

## ULTIMATE REALIZATION OR REDUCTIO AD ABSURDUM?

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 3 The Apex

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

The issues at stake go right back to the origins of literate (i.e., notated) music. The “real-time” practices Benjamin invokes—improvisation, embellishment, creative play—are the practices, and reflect the values, of “oral” culture. Their eclipse marks the full ascendancy of literacy—an ascendancy a full millennium in the making. And indeed the values Babbitt’s compositional practices maximize—extreme (approaching “total”) density, fixity, and consistency of texture, maintained over a long temporal (= “structural”) span—are precisely the ones associated with the “spatialization” of music that literacy made possible.

The complete “autonomy” of the postwar serial product, extended to the point where every piece of music is ideally based on unique axiomatic premises, is likewise a conceptual child of literacy, in the sense that works of art within a literate tradition may exist independently of those who make them up and remember them. Musical works that can be remembered or precisely imagined only with difficulty, or that (ideally) cannot be memorized at all, would most completely satisfy this criterion of value—if such a value could be taken as an absolute. Concepts of artistic unity in works of performing art, and, conversely, awareness of the function of the parts within the whole in such works (what we call an analytical awareness), are thus distinctive of literate cultures. A music in which analysis can potentially—and, in extreme instances, even actually—replace the acts of performance or listening could thus be viewed as the highest possible realization of the literate ideal. In historical terms it does indeed represent a pinnacle, an apex, a *ne plus ultra*, and in the broadest view that may count as its truest historical achievement—or at least its most accurately described historical significance.

The never-to-be-settled question is, at what price? It can never be settled because price stands for values, and equally defensible values can be irreconcilable. What from one perspective may look like a logical culmination or a zenith may look from another like a perversion of values. Those who see and value music only in terms of a historical development will see the triumph of literacy in one way; those who see the primary value of music in the social exchanges it affords will find less to admire. But things and events as such are value-free. Values reside in the observers and their purposes.

The apparent arrogance of the position “classically” exemplified by Babbitt’s “Who Cares if You Listen?” is, if you like, the hubris of literacy. But that hubris, however objectionable, cannot be wholly extricated from the good causes it may be seen to serve. It found abundant expression among the great figures of twentieth-century music, especially (of course) in Schoenberg, the greatest apostle of teleological history, who saw the evolution of music as headed inexorably toward the triumph of literate practice (representing “culture” and “autonomy”) over every aspect of oral practice (representing atavisms of the “primitive” and the “contingent”).

That is what led Schoenberg, and many after him, into what can seem such incorrigibly snobbish attitudes

toward performers and listeners, their fellow human beings. His pupil Dika Newlin recalled him announcing that “music need not be performed any more than books need to be read aloud, for its logic is perfectly represented on the printed page; and the performer, for all his intolerable arrogance, is totally unnecessary except as his interpretations make the music understandable to an audience unfortunate enough not to be able to read it in print.”<sup>5 1</sup> As for the listener, “All I know is that he exists, and insofar as he isn't indispensable for acoustic reasons (since music doesn't sound well in an empty hall), he's only a nuisance.”<sup>5 2</sup>

By now we have some awareness of the many social and political (including musico-political) factors that conditioned such remarks. There is no reason to assume that Schoenberg consciously cast himself as the champion of the literate tradition of music as such, nor any reason to assume that the issues of “orality” vs. “literacy” that interest historians today were on his mind. The historical fact nevertheless remains that the politics of the twentieth century drove the discourse of literacy to its extreme, and Babbitt's achievement, both as composer and as theorist of composition, represents what in retrospect seems a historical limit.

To say this is not necessarily to impute to Babbitt any greater consciousness of such a role than Schoenberg possessed, but seeing him as the ultimate protagonist of literacy over orality does help account for the equanimity with which he met the sort of criticism we have been reviewing. In an open letter published in a special double issue of *Perspectives of New Music* commemorating Babbitt's sixtieth birthday in 1976, the composer and music theorist Wallace Berry (1928–91) made bold to advance some questions with regard to the “auditory construal” of the music all the other contributors were celebrating, and the relationship between those well-known difficulties or impossibilities and the, to him, grievous observation that “much music of our time, yours and mine, exists, essentially, in alienation.” Maintaining a somewhat detached and stilted diction to offset, perhaps, the emotionally volatile nature of the matters he was broaching, Berry continued:

It has been the understandable reflex of many of us to assume an attitude of brave defiance in this state of affairs, but I cannot imagine any convincing asseveration of genuine apathy toward it. Nor can we protest that today's music suffers for lack of exposure (and that if it had better exposure it would be understood and welcomed by audiences now so largely repelled by it, if on occasion intrigued at the “primitive” level of the impact of the isolated sonority and the like). And the alienation of which I despair is not merely with regard to our concert halls, which will continue to be governed in large part by crass commercial considerations, but (of course with notable exceptions that prove the point) with respect to our peers, experienced and sophisticated audiences in centers of artistic and cultural adventure and exploration. We can no longer sanctimoniously assail (as repressive, as prejudicially indisposed, as inattentive) those who, *knowing* today's music *and* the historical bases out of which it has evolved, are estranged from that music....

There are episodes in music's history that seem to have proved, finally, while exerting vital and constructive influences upon the course of things both coexistent and to follow, to be fascinating culs-de-sac, important not only in the impact by which, in part, subsequent developments are shaped, but in the intrinsic worth of many individual expressions and in didactic significances. Is it possible that the ultimate developments of serialism have attained, or are reasonably seen as coursing toward, such an end?<sup>5 3</sup>

In his published response to the essays collected in his honor, Babbitt was courteous enough. Of all the contributors to the volume, he conceded, “Wallace Berry most demands and deserves answers.”<sup>5 4</sup> But he did not rise to the bait, offering instead (quite uncharacteristically) to relegate Berry's questions to the arena of taste, about which, as the saying goes, there can be no dispute. He, too, couched his thoughts in an unnaturally ceremonious idiom, as if to divest them of emotional baggage. But as always, obvious avoidance only succeeds in calling greater attention to the issue being circumvented:

I do suspect that there may be differences in attitude, normative differences, between us, originating—perhaps—outside of music, and eventuating in our music, or—possibly—proceeding in the retrograde, even retrograde inverted, direction, even if only in that there are those of us who prefer the relative quiet and solace of the dead-end street to the distractions and annoyances of the crowded thoroughfare, although quite a few folks—at one time or another—have found their way to our cul-de-sac, if only because they, mistakenly or misguidedly, took a wrong turn.... Just as the philosophy of art has carried its practitioners into the philosophy of mind, our art is ever mindful that whatever one musical mind can create another can come to comprehend, even if it comes—normatively—to decide that it doesn't like it, approve of it, or of the isolation the two of them thereby suffer or enjoy.

But of course Babbitt's careful choice of language allowed the possibility that comprehension come by way of analysis—the contemplation of the musical object as a spatialized whole, by those with special training in the ways of the literate culture—rather than on the more direct perceptual terms Berry had specified. Babbitt saw no reason, then or since, to give an inch of ground to the “oral” culture, which he equated with the “crowded thoroughfare” of commerce. The sacrifice of a listening (rather than a looking) audience was a price he was prepared to pay for purity.

It is worth one more reiteration that the purity Babbitt consciously sought in his theory and practice was not necessarily the purity that is being attributed to it in this account, any more than Copland's or Stravinsky's conscious reasons for embracing serial composition directly reflected or acknowledged the factors invoked in this chapter to explain their actions. Copland, as we have seen, always said that he simply “needed more chords.” Stravinsky argued, more categorically, that significant artistic change can only come about through “an irresistible pull within the art” rather than through the sort of “social pressures” that “Marxists,” as he put it, preferred to invoke.<sup>55</sup> But even as he said this, his gratuitous, seemingly superstitious sidelong glance at Zhdanov (the Marxist-in-chief where the arts were concerned) told another story. Not only artists, but all who profess to act as conscious or autonomous agents in a complicated world are subject to many influences, including some of which they may perforce be relatively unaware. It is the historian's job to be aware of them and, however fallibly, to describe them.

But even if we allow for its political contingency, Babbitt maintained his position with consistency and integrity, and won for it a virtually universal respect within the academy, even among those convinced, like Wallace Berry, that it represented an historical cul-de-sac. It was only when some of Babbitt's colleagues and former pupils began claiming for academic serialism qualities (such as traditional emotional expressivity) that lay audiences complained of missing, that allegations of bad faith became common.

As one critic put it, it was as if one asked Claire Bloom or some comparably eloquent actor to read “Pointwise Periodic Homeomorphisms,” Babbitt's notorious hypothetical math lecture, “with all the expressive resources of voice and gesture she would bring to the role of Ophelia or Desdemona.”<sup>56</sup> Such a performance could only seem silly and gratuitous, whether one listened as a “layman” or as a math professor, and made both the textual object and its performance seem inadequate to their respective purposes. Ironically enough, it was only when academic composers seemed ready to retreat a bit from Babbitt's hard line that their position began to lose credibility. It was then that the tide began to turn against the sort of uncompromising “truth” that had been artistically upholdable at the height of the cold war, and that provided academic serialism in America with its philosophical support system.

But we can end this chapter on an even more obviously ironic note. It was when he formulated his time-point system, which implied, and therefore demanded, a precision of rhythmic execution that appeared superhuman even to his supporters, that Babbitt began touting the electronic medium as a necessary practical adjunct of theoretical advance. The already-quoted article in *Perspectives* that first promulgated the time-point system was in fact called “Twelve-Tone Rhythmic Structure and the Electronic Medium,” and it contained the prediction that “such pitch and rhythmic extensions of the twelve-tone system” as Babbitt was proposing would inevitably

“carry music to the point of purely electronic feasibility,” and this because only electronic means could afford the composer a control over his product that would suffice to allow “the necessary characteristics” of his music to be “preserved in the auditory domain, and not merely in the domain of notational specification.”<sup>57</sup>

In other words, only electronic media could give music the sort of fixity and exactness in the domain of physical sound that it already possessed in the conceptual domain of notation. It was the triumph of literacy over orality that demanded the final sacrifice of the finite “human” to the infinitely adaptable and obediently automated performance media that would eventually be controlled by computers. Electronic media promised (or, depending on one's perspective, threatened) the ultimate dehumanization of the art, a dehumanization whose status as a logical (inevitable? necessary? desirable?) consequence of literacy now stood revealed.

The irony was, and is, that the same electronic media that enabled composers on the extreme “literate” edge to realize their notated complexities without loss of detail also made it possible to compose without the use of scores at all, and thus inaugurated a new era of improvisational (or “real time”) composing. In the end, as we will shortly discover, electronic media would subvert the triumph of literacy and give music a new future.

## Notes:

(51) Dika Newlin, *Schoenberg Remembered: Diaries and Recollections 1938–1976* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1980), p. 164 (recorded 10 January 1940).

(52) Schoenberg to Alexander von Zemlinsky, 20 March 1918; in Arnold Schoenberg, *Letters*, ed. Erwin Stein, trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1964), p. 54.

(53) Wallace Berry, “Apostrophe: A Letter from Ann Arbor,” *Perspectives of New Music* XIV/2–XV/1 (double issue, “Sounds and Words: Milton Babbitt at 60”): 195, 197–98.

(54) Milton Babbitt, “Responses: A First Approximation,” *Ibid.* pp. 22–23.

(55) Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959), p. 127.

(56) R. Taruskin, “How Talented Composers Become Useless,” *New York Times*, Arts and Leisure, 10 March 1996, p. 31; rpt. in R. Taruskin, *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), p. 87

(57) Milton Babbitt, “Twelve-Tone Rhythmic Structure and the Electronic Medium,” pp. 77–78.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

## CHAPTER 4 The Third Revolution

### Music and Electronic Media; Varèse's Career

Chapter: CHAPTER 4 The Third Revolution

Source: MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

## TAPE

*I believe that the use of noise to make music will continue and increase until we reach a music produced through the aid of electrical instruments which will make available for musical purposes any and all sounds that can be heard.<sup>1</sup>*

—John Cage, “The Future of Music: Credo” (1940)

When the young John Cage made that boldly capitalized prediction, it seemed like one more fantasy among the many he enunciated in that brash utopian Credo, already sampled in chapter 2. And yet, unbeknownst to him or to his audience, the practical means for implementing it were already at hand. Five years earlier, at a 1935 radio exhibition in Berlin, the German firm AEG (*Allgemeine Elektrizitäts Gesellschaft* or “General Electric Company”) demonstrated a new invention called the Magnetophone, a device for converting sound signals into magnetic impulses that could be stored indefinitely on a paper tape coated with a metallic oxide, and then reconverted (or “played back”) into sound. Actually, the concept of magnetic sound recording had been described theoretically half a century before that. An ancestor of the magnetophone called the Telegraphone, a Danish invention that recorded sound magnetically on a thin metal wire, was exhibited at the Paris World Exhibition of 1900, and received a prize. (Wire recorders were not definitively supplanted by tape recorders until the middle of the new century.)

Early magnetophones and wire recorders produced a playback of limited frequency range, seriously distorted by background noise, or “hiss.” Nobody foresaw any immediate musical applications for such machines. AEG envisioned the magnetophone as an office dictation device, or a means of storing radio programs like news bulletins for rebroadcast. Besides radio stations, early customers included the Gestapo, the Nazi secret police, which used it to record confessions, among other things. But during the war, when German technological advances were hidden from Allied view, the magnetophone was improved to the point where it surpassed the dynamic and frequency response of disc recordings; and the use of a supersonic bias frequency in the recording process dramatically reduced the background noise.

By the early 1940s, German companies were using tape recorders as an intermediate stage in the production of commercial music recordings, rather than recording the sound directly on disc. Not only was the sound quality thereby improved, but also far more could be recorded at a stretch than the amount that could go on a single 78 RPM “side.” For the record, so to speak, the earliest continuous tape-recorded opera performance to be commercially released on disc was of *Abu Hassan* (1811), a one-act “Turkish” singspiel by Carl Maria von Weber. It was originally recorded “live” for broadcast on Radio Berlin in 1944, with the young soprano Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, later a great international diva, in the role of Fatime.

Above all, however, tape recordings were easy to handle and manipulate, and made composite editing possible.

Good “takes” of different passages could be spliced together. All of a singer's best notes could be included in a single finished product. Performances on records could be made literally flawless, simply by splicing out and replacing all the flaws. The standard joke of the recording studio became the one about the soloist, admiring the playback, being teased by the recording engineer: “Yes, don't you wish you could play like that?”

After the war, the American occupying troops were amazed to find the improved tape recorders in every German radio station. All of AEG's patents having fallen into Allied hands as spoils of war, the machines could be duplicated and marketed in the victorious nations without payment of royalties. The first American tape recorders were produced in 1947 by the Ampex Company, copied from a pair shipped home from Radio Frankfurt by John Mullin, a sound engineer who was serving with the U.S. Army communications corps. One of Ampex's first customers was the crooner Bing Crosby, who began tape-recording his weekly programs at his convenience for later broadcast.

Soon it became apparent to alert musicians that the same advantages in handling and manipulation that served the purposes of commercial recording could also serve the purposes of composition. The cutting and splicing techniques that improved live-recorded performances could also be used to create all kinds of sound collages. In addition, playback speed could be varied, with consequent alterations to the pitch, rapidity, and timbre of recorded sounds. Connecting (“patching”) the playback head of one tape recorder to the recording head of another made it possible to store the altered sounds for use in composition.

But that was only the beginning. By reversing the positions of the tape spools on the “deck” of the recording machine, tapes could be played backward, with radical alteration to sound “envelope” or attack-decay properties: a tone played on the piano, for example, became a whooshing, accelerating crescendo to an abrupt cutoff. A length of tape could be spliced into a continuous loop that produced an ostinato effect when played back. Such ostinatos could be montaged into patterns and textures without limit. Additional recording-studio devices like echo chambers, sound filters, and mixers could be patched into the recording circuit for further alterations to sounds stored on tape.

Composers were standing ready to exploit these new possibilities, especially in the ranks of the newly resurgent postwar avant-garde, all warring factions included. Though they may have disagreed about everything else, they were united in greeting the new technological marvel. For “zero hour” types, it offered the most dramatic chance to wipe the slate clean of all existing traditions and techniques. In his 1940 lecture, Cage already hailed the advent of the first genuinely “twentieth-century means for making music.”<sup>2</sup> For control freaks, it offered an unprecedented degree of determinacy, since at the splicing block the most complicated or exacting rhythmic relationships (for example) could be worked out in terms of finely measured lengths of tape—the most literal instance imaginable of the “spatialization” of music mooted at the end of chapter 3.

Milton Babbitt, for one, was thrilled by “the notion of having complete control over one's composition, of being complete master of all you survey.”<sup>3</sup> At the opposite extreme, that of radical indeterminacy, Cage was also celebrating the possibility “for composers to make music directly, without the assistance of intermediary performers”<sup>4</sup> —more evidence that the perceived polar opposites of advanced music making were united in a common commitment to technological research and development. Cage joyously foresaw the obsolescence of musical notation. For devotees of liberation, whether of sounds or of people, endless prospects loomed.

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## Notes:

(1) John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage* (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1966), pp. 3–4.

(2) *Ibid.* p. 6.

(3) Milton Babbitt, in Joel Chadabe, *Electric Sound: The Past and Promise of Electronic Music* (Upper Saddle

River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1997), p. 18.

(4) Cage, *Silence*, p. 4.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Electro-acoustic music

Computers and music

Luigi Russolo

## AN OLD DREAM COME TRUE

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 4 The Third Revolution

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

All of these approaches to direct “electroacoustic” synthesis of music (to use what later became the standard term) had a considerable prehistory by the middle of the twentieth century. It can be traced back even before the invention of electric current, to music boxes and more elaborate mechanical contrivances such as the Panharmonicon of Johann Nepomuk Maelzel (1772–1838; best known as the inventor of the pendulum metronome), an automated orchestra powered by weights and cylinders, for which Beethoven wrote his “Battle Symphony” (a.k.a. *Wellington's Victory*) in 1813.

The advent of electric power was a spur to many more such inventions, like the Telharmonium (alias Dynamophone), a two-hundred-ton apparatus for producing “scientifically perfect music” in any tuning system, assembled by the inventor Thaddeus Cahill (1867–1934) and exhibited in New York in 1906. An article on this machine in a popular magazine came to the attention of Ferruccio Busoni, the famous pianist-composer and perhaps the most influential teacher of the time, who saw in it the promise of musical emancipation at the dawn of the new century. “Music was born free,” Busoni declared in his *Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music* (1907), paraphrasing Rousseau's *Social Contract*, “and to win freedom is its destiny.”<sup>5</sup>

Through the use of machines like Cahill's, music might yet defeat the limitations that less advanced technologies had imposed on it, and at last achieve its true aims, “namely, the imitation of nature and the interpretation of human feelings”<sup>6</sup> (italics original). That would truly be an “absolute music,” Busoni rhapsodized. His fantasy of a free music—never achieved but hinted at in “preparatory and intermediary passages (preludes and transitions)”<sup>7</sup> like the introduction before the final fugue in Beethoven's big “Hammerklavier” Sonata, op. 106—chimes peculiarly with the utopian spirit of the midcentury avant-garde:

What a vista of fair hopes and dreamlike fancies is thus opened for the ear, and for Art! Who has not dreamt that he could float on air? and firmly believed his dream to be reality?—Let us take thought, how music may be restored to its primitive, natural essence; let us free it from architectonic, acoustic and esthetic dogmas; let it be pure invention and sentiment, in harmonies, in forms, in tone-colors (for invention and sentiment are not the prerogative of melody alone); let it follow the line of the rainbow and vie with the clouds in breaking sunbeams; let Music be naught else than Nature mirrored by and reflected from the human breast; for it is sounding air and floats above and beyond the air; within Man himself as universally and absolutely as in Creation entire; for it can gather together and disperse without losing in intensity.<sup>8</sup>

That vision of freedom and naturalness inspired many artists and inventors in the early part of the twentieth century to imagine and experiment with all kinds of artificial contrivances. The noisiest, most picturesque faction was the *musicisti futuristi*, a group of Italian artists who sought a musical application of the principles

enunciated in the Futurist Manifesto of 1909. This document, by Filippo Marinetti (1876–1944), a poet and novelist, was probably the most radically antitraditionalist proclamation of its day. It called for the erasure of artistic memory—in practical (but not necessarily serious) terms, for the destruction of museums and concert halls—and the consecration of art to the celebration of the highly romanticized dynamics and dangers of twentieth-century life: warfare (“the world's natural hygiene,”<sup>9</sup> according to a Marinetti manifesto of 1910) and conquest on an unprecedented scale, and above all the machines that would provide the means to realize these ferocious ideals. (Not coincidentally, Marinetti was one of the founding members of the Italian Fascist Party.)

*Futurismo* found direct expression in literature and the visual arts, media in which all it took was imagination and descriptive or illustrative skill to create the appropriate artifacts. Music, however, required equipment; and in the absence of such accouterments, machine music remained at first, for the most part, a utopian fantasy. It gave rise to a little manifesto of its own in 1913 (perhaps significantly, the year of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*), issued in Milan by Luigi Russolo (1885–1947), a painter, and dedicated to Francesco Balilla Pratella (1880–1955), the “grande musicista futurista,” who had just composed a raucous choral work called *Inno alla vita* (“Hymn to life”). Russolo's manifesto reached its rhetorical climax in a passage that may have been resounding in Cage's inner ear (its frequent bellowing capitalizations dazzling his mind's eye, too) when he delivered his remarkable prediction in 1940:

In the nineteenth century, with the invention of machines, Noise was born. Today Noise is triumphant, and reigns supreme over the senses of men. The art of music at first sought and achieved purity and sweetness of sound; later, it blended diverse sounds, but always with the intent to caress the ear with suave harmonies. Today, growing ever more complicated, it seeks those combinations of sounds that fall most dissonantly, strangely, and harshly upon the ear. We thus approach nearer and nearer to the MUSIC OF NOISE. We must break out of this narrow circle of pure musical sounds, and conquer the infinite variety of noise-sounds.<sup>10</sup>

Russolo ended his manifesto with a “scientific” classification of noises into six families, to be produced mechanically by means of some as yet uninvented technology, from which the orchestra of the future would make its music:

1	2	3	4	5	6
Booms	Whistles	Whispers	Screams	Noises	Voices of
Thunderclaps	Hisses	Murmurs	Screeches	obtained by	animals and
Explosions	Snorts	Mutterings	Rustlings	percussion	men: Shouts
Crashes		Bustling	Buzzes	on metals,	Shrieks
Splashes		noises	Cracklings	wood, stone,	Groans
Roars		Gurgles	Sounds	terracotta	Howls
			obtained by		Laughs
			friction		Wheezes
					Sobs

In 1913, Russolo was back with a book, *L'arte dei rumori* ("The art of noises"), which included the first designs for futurist instruments called *intonarumori*, "noise intoners." Together with a percussionist named Ugo Piatti (possibly a pseudonym; the name means "cymbals"), Russolo began constructing them in the form of boxes of varying size, with acoustical horns like the ones on early phonographs attached to their fronts, and with some sound-generating mechanism inside, activated by turning a crank at the rear. They included a *crepitatore* (crackler), a *ululatore* (hooter), a *gracidatore* (croaker), a *gorgogliatore* (gurgler), and a *ronzatore* (buzzer). Between 1914 and 1921 Russolo conducted some *concerti futuristici* with these instruments in Milan and Paris. A typical composition for them was titled *Il risveglio di una città* ("The awakening of a city"). Except for the several measures reproduced in Fig. 4-1, from an Italian arts magazine of 1914, the scores and parts are lost; the *intonarumori* were speculatively refurbished by Italian musicologists for a recording in 1977.<sup>11</sup> The music was, by all reports, of a loudness sufficient to elicit exciting opposition from the audience; on one occasion irate listeners mounted the stage and attempted a violent intervention, no doubt very much to the composer's taste.

Perhaps inspired by the nightingale episode in Respighi's *Pines of Rome*, Marinetti tried a new tack in 1933: he had some "field recordings" made on 78-RPM discs, including landscape noises, street music, human nonverbal vocal sounds ("the wheh wheh wheh of a baby boy," "surprised Ooooooh of an 11-year-old girl," etc.), rhythmic environmental noises (dripping water, keys turning in locks, electric doorbells), individual tones produced on various musical instruments, "pure silence" (i.e., the sound of the phonograph needle in the groove), and so forth, and assembled the sounds into collages performed by assistants, standing at phonograph turntables, who played the records on cue.

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## Notes:

- (5) Ferruccio Busoni, *Sketch of a New Esthetic of Music*, trans. Theodore Baker, in *Three Classics in the Aesthetic of Music* (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), p. 77.
- (6) *Ibid.* p. 76.
- (7) *Ibid.* p. 79.
- (8) *Ibid.* p. 95.
- (9) Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Le Roi Bombance* (1910).
- (10) Luigi Russolo, "The Art of Noises: Futurist Manifesto," trans. Stephen Somervell, in Nicolas Slonimsky, *Music since 1900* (4th ed.; New York: Scribners, 1971), p. 1298.
- (11) *Musica futurista*, Fonit Cetra FDM 0007 (2 LP).

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An Old Dream Come True : Music in th...

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

See also from Grove Music Online

Synthesizer

Theremin

Ondes martenot

## GENERATING SYNTHETIC SOUNDS

Chapter: CHAPTER 4 The Third Revolution

Source: MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

fig. 4-1 Luigi Russolo, *Il risveglio di una città* ("The awakening of a city," 1914), a composition for an ensemble of futurist *intonarumori* (noise intoners). Reading down the left margin of the score as usual, they are *ululatori* (hooters), *rombatori* (rumblers), *crepicatori* (cracklers), *stropicciatori* (scrapers), *scoppiatori* (exploders), *ronzatori* (buzzers), *gorgogliatori* (gurglers), and *sibilatori* (hissers).

Another approach was taken by electrical engineers in several countries, who designed new musical instruments that produced sounds that flaunted the electronic origins that made them sounds specific to the twentieth century. Perhaps the earliest, very likely the simplest, and surely the most famous, was invented in 1920 by a Russian physicist named Lev Sergeyevich Termen (1896–1993, also renowned as a television pioneer), who

thought he was building a burglar alarm. His device featured a pair of antennas that set up an electromagnetic field, into which the intrusion of any electrical conductor (say a human body) would touch off a signal from a radio oscillator.



fig. 4-2 Lev Sergeyevich Termen (Leon Théremin) with his *termenvox* (theremin).

As one approached the vertical antenna at the top of the cabinet, the signal (just a controlled version of the “squeal” one obtained between stations when tuning an early radio) became higher in pitch; as one approached the loop antenna at the side of the instrument, the signal became weaker (and silent if one touched the antenna, making articulations possible). An amateur cellist, Termen amused himself by moving his hands in such a way as to make the invisible field respond with tunes from his repertory: Massenet's *Elegy*, Saint-Saëns's *The Swan*, and the like. Since he found himself playing his new instrument without touching it, just moving his hands in the air, Termen christened his invention the “etherphone.” In March 1922, Termen was summoned to demonstrate his device to Vladimir Lenin, the head of the young Soviet government, in his office at the Moscow Kremlin. Lenin was interested in the machine chiefly as a security device. He wrote to Trotsky, the head of the Red Army, suggesting that they procure some etherphones so that the guard duties of the Kremlin cadets might be reduced. But he also authorized Termen to tour Russia with a free railway pass and show off his invention as a miraculous musical instrument one did not touch, as propaganda for the wonders of electricity (one of Lenin's pet slogans being “Communism is Soviet power plus electrification of the whole country”). In 1924, after Soviet Russia had signed a patent convention with Germany, Termen was sent abroad to set up a facility for the mass production of

his instrument, to be marketed as the Termenvox.

In Germany, and later in the United States, where he lived and worked from 1927 to 1938 (both as promoter of his electrical devices and as a Soviet espionage agent), the inventor signed his name Leon Theremin, and his instrument became known, simply, as the theremin. The manner in which it was promoted, and the repertoire that (following the inventor's lead) was normally performed on it, led to its being regarded as something like an electronic violin or cello, rather than a vehicle for a new music. Few composers took an interest in it. John Cage went out of his way, in his lecture on the Future of Music, to deride "Thereminists," who, despite the "genuinely new possibilities" that the device offered in its unbroken frequency continuum, "did their utmost to make the instrument sound like some old instrument, giving it a sickeningly sweet vibrato, and performing upon it, with difficulty, masterpieces from the past." In effect, Cage complained, "Thereminists act as censors, giving the public those sounds they think the public will like." As a vexing result, "we are shielded from new sound experiences."<sup>12</sup> A somewhat more optimistic and imaginative view was taken by Ernst Toch (1887–1964), an Austrian composer who would eventually emigrate to the United States, but who caught the theremin act in Berlin. He realized that the inventor's lack of musical sophistication, and his exclusive interest in marketing his instrument as a medium for conventional performance rather than for composition, made him a poor herald of its possibilities. Reacting precisely the way Busoni might have done, Toch noted that "the concrete material of music has consisted until now of a limited series of exactly fixed pitches and of a limited series of exactly fixed sound colors," and complained that "the closer Theremin in his 'concert' attempts to come to them, to produce them in a deceiving manner, the less interesting his demonstration becomes for the composer." What interested Toch was not the performance of the hackneyed musical selections but rather

the sound phenomena which, demonstrated before the "concert" and during the lecture as rough raw material, often similar to animal or climatological sounds of nature, appeared during the "concert" as uncalled-for byproducts and hardly noticed waste products. Just in these lies the fertile germ of a true new vista which Theremin lays open to the composer of music, still incalculable in its consequences,

—for in them one heard material that "lies *between* the fixed pitches and *between* the fixed tone colors: rich, tempting, promising and enchanting for the artist."<sup>13</sup>

Most of the music composed for (or performed on) the theremin was of the hackneyed substitute-violin type. The first concerted work for the instrument, *Simfonicheskaya misteriya* ("Symphonic mysterium") by Andrey Pashchenko (1885–1972), composed in 1923 on commission from the Soviet government, incorporated its eerie, otherworldly timbre into a Scriabinesque pastiche for orchestra. The best-known concerto for the instrument, written in 1944 by the Cypriot-American composer Anis Fuleihan (1900–70) for Clara Rockmore (1911–98), a Russian-American violin prodigy who became the world's most accomplished "thereminist," was an exercise in orientalism. Rockmore's special achievement was to defeat the built-in glissando normally heard between the notes within the theremin's seamless pitch continuum and (with the help of some attachments the inventor designed for her) to actually manage staccato articulations and fast passagework without sacrificing purity of intonation.

It was a marvelous feat, but in light of Toch's comment, it defeated the instrument's potential as a novel resource for composers. The only composer to capitalize fully on the theremin's "defects" was the Australian-American Percy Grainger (1882–1961), best known during his lifetime as a piano virtuoso who, significantly, had studied briefly with Busoni and had been infected with the latter's idealistic notions of musical freedom. The theremin, which had no "natural" tuning system, was completely free of prejudice where intervals were concerned.

Busoni had ended his *Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music* with ruminations about microtones, but warned that all fixed tuning systems, whether based on equal semitones, quarter tones, or sixth tones, were equally arbitrary artifacts of culture when compared with nature's limitless resources. Tempered keyboard instruments, the great pianist fumed, "have so thoroughly schooled our ears that we are no longer capable of hearing anything else—

incapable of hearing except through this impure medium. Yet Nature created an *infinite gradation—infinite!* Who still knows it nowadays?"<sup>14</sup> The theremin, Grainger was quick to realize, offered that infinite gradation to composers. It could turn Busoni's fantasy of a free music into a practical reality.

He had responded immediately to Busoni's *Sketch* with a composition actually titled *Free Music* for string quartet (1907). After hearing Clara Rockmore's debut recital, Grainger arranged the piece for four theremins, and completed a sequel, *Free Music No. 2* for six theremins, in 1936. In a letter to the critic Olin Downes, he echoed Busoni's nature rhapsodies, rejoicing that he had created conditions under which "a melody is as free to roam thru space as a painter is free to draw & paint free lines, free curves, create free shapes."<sup>15</sup> A description he wrote for publication was more reminiscent of *Futurismo*: "It seems to me absurd to live in an age of flying and yet not be able to execute tonal glides and curves."<sup>16</sup> He invented a special notation for his glides and curves, plotting them on graph paper in inks of different colors to represent the different instruments in the ensemble. He never published the scores, however; nor were the Free Musics ever performed. What held Grainger back was the sense, reminiscent of Cage, that music could never be truly free as long as human beings were involved in its performance:

Too long has music been subject to the limitations of the human hand, and subject as well to the interfering interpretations of a middle-man: the performer. A composer wants to speak to his public direct. Machines (if properly constructed and properly written for) are capable of niceties of emotional expression impossible to a human performer.<sup>17</sup>

Grainger was among those who placed their creative ideas on hold, awaiting the advent of a technology that might render them feasible. In 1944, he collaborated with an engineer acquaintance in designing a "Free Music Machine" that would combine the sound-gliding principle of the theremin with a mechanism for performing "complex irregular rhythms accurately, rhythms much too difficult for human beings to execute." They built a working model in 1955, by which time tape technology was available; but Grainger, creatively exhausted, did not take advantage of it.

Meanwhile, as Albert Glinsky, Lev Termen's biographer, put it, "the theremin debate—melodic voice instrument or microtonal sound resource—was easily reconciled among the larger public; it came down to the instrument as simple, quirky entertainment."<sup>18</sup> Until a new wave of interest in the instrument was suddenly inspired in its homeland by the 1991 demise of the Soviet Union, few if any serious compositions for it postdated Fuleihan's concerto. Instead, it became a ubiquitous sound effect in radio dramas (beginning with the *Green Hornet* mystery serial) and science fiction and horror movies, or "psychological thrillers" (beginning with Robert Emmet Dolan's 1944 score for *Lady in the Dark* and continuing the next year with Alfred Hitchcock's classic *Spellbound*, with music by Miklós Rózsa). In the 1950s simple theremin-type devices were marketed in do-it-yourself kits to teenagers, and began turning up in youth-oriented popular music (most famously, in 1966, in the Beach Boys' *Good Vibrations*).

Less notorious than the theremin, and less spectacular, but perhaps more significant in terms of the musical repertory that it stimulated, was a device called *ondes musicales* ("musical waves"), unveiled in 1928 by the French engineer Maurice Martenot (1898–1980) and now called *ondes martenot* after him. It produces its sound on the same principle as the theremin. At first the performer inserted a finger in a ring and pulled a ribbon from side to side to alter the pitch along a smooth continuum. Later models added a key board to make conventional tunings available in addition to glissando effects.

Its greater compatibility with familiar musical styles and playing techniques made the *ondes martenot* easier than the theremin to assimilate into standard musical practice. Pianists or organists could master it quickly, and it could effectively augment symphony orchestras with extremely low sounds (Arthur Honegger, a member of Les Six, preferring it for this purpose to the contrabassoon) or, alternatively, a high vibrato-laden wail that Olivier Messiaen exploited memorably to evoke the figure of the love goddess in his *Turangalila-symphonie* of



1948. After the war a class in ondes martenot was established at the Paris Conservatory, and Pierre Boulez won his first local fame as an exponent of the instrument.

The trautionium, a third electronic instrument of a type similar to the theremin and the ondes martenot, was invented around 1930 by the German engineer Friedrich Trautwein (1888–1956), but never had a comparable success. Its playing technique, involving the pressure of a finger against a continuous metal wire on which pitches were marked off, was more easily learned than that of the theremin, but it lacked the ondes's advantage of a keyboard. Hindemith, who made a point of writing concertos or sonatas for every instrument, wrote a *Konzertstück* for trautionium and strings (never published) in 1931. Later a pair of keyboards was added to the design by one of Trautwein's former pupils. In this form the instrument (or at least its sounds) became familiar to moviegoers from the soundtrack score by Bernard Herrmann (1911–75), with Remi Gassman and Oskar Sala, to Alfred Hitchcock's horror thriller *The Birds* (1963).

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## Notes:

(12) Cage, *Silence*, p. 4.

(13) Ernst Toch, "Theremin und Komponist," *Neue Badische Landes-Zeitung* (6 December 1927), trans. Richard and Edith Kobler, in Albert Glinsky, *Theremin: Ether Music and Espionage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. 67.

(14) *Three Classics in the Aesthetic of Music*, p. 89.

(15) Quoted in Glinsky, *Theremin*, p. 252.

(16) *Ibid.*

(17) *Ibid.*

(18) Glinsky, *Theremin*, p. 252.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

See also from Grove Music Online

Edgard Varèse

Electro-acoustic music

## A MAXIMALIST OUT OF SEASON

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 4 The Third Revolution

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

Another composer who sought to realize a Busonian vision using electronic instruments as early as he possibly could, but had to wait, was the Franco-American Edgar (or Edgard) Varèse (1883–1965), a remarkable — and remarkably isolated — figure on the avant-garde scene at a time when there was virtually no musical avant-garde to speak of. Like Iannis Xenakis (see chapter 2), Varèse was trained in mathematics and engineering before he studied music seriously. In 1907, after reading Busoni's *Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music*, he went to Berlin and sought the author out as a mentor. His interest in electric instruments was kindled even before World War I, at first by the “dynaphone,” an early sound synthesizer invented by the French engineer René Bertrand.

Varèse moved to New York in 1915 and at first tried to make a career as a conductor. His earliest American opus, on which he worked between 1918 and 1921, was a gigantic orchestral score called *Amériques*. (The title did not refer only to the continents of the New World; in the vocabulary of Europeans, “an America” often meant a magnificent discovery.) It showed the influence of Busoni's “free music” theorizing in the parts it contained for two sirens, acoustical devices consisting of a metal disk pierced with holes arranged equidistantly in a circle and rotated by means of a handle over a jet of compressed air that whistles through the holes at a frequency determined by the speed of rotation. Invented for use as fog signals or as warning devices on fire engines or ambulances, sirens are not normally thought of as musical instruments; but as he put it much later in an essay called “The Liberation of Sound,” Varèse “always felt the need of a kind of continuous flowing curve that instruments could not give me”<sup>19</sup> — exactly what Grainger had sought in his *Free Music*. The sirens in *Amériques* are played by two of the eleven percussionists the piece requires.



fig. 4-3 Edgard Varèse listening to *Poème électronique*, 1958.

And just as Grainger turned from strings to theremins, so Varèse replaced the sirens in *Amériques*, on its French premiere in 1929, with a pair of ondes martenot. For a later piece, a neoprimitivist choral fantasy called *Ecuatorial* to a text from the Mayan scripture *Popul Vuh*, he commissioned from their inventor a pair of theremins of especially high and piercing range, capable of producing near-supersonic frequencies and providing the wailing timbres, soaring glissandos, and endlessly sustained notes that constituted Varèse's imagined pre-Columbian music in all its "elemental rude intensity."<sup>20</sup> The work was first performed in April 1934, under Nicolas Slonimsky, with the specially designed theremins; but when published, the score again specified the more readily available ondes martenot.

That publication did not take place until 1961. Varèse's music of the 1920s and 1930s was out of joint with its

time. He was nurturing, or trying to nurture, the complementary spirits of neoprimitivism and futurism far into the age of neoclassic irony, seeking to keep the frantically optimistic Art of Noises alive in a period when the defense of high culture seemed sooner to demand pessimistic retrenchment. The very summit of musical futurism was a trio of rugged compositions by Varèse, composed in New York between 1922 and 1931, that sported titles borrowed from the world of science. *Hyperprism* (1923) and *Intégrales* (1925) were scored for small wind bands with outsize percussion sections. *Ionisation* (1931) was a composition for percussion alone: thirteen players on a total of forty-one instruments.

Varèse's "scientific" titles are not easily interpreted. *Hyperprism* refers, presumably, to the intensification of a prismatic (refractive or light-bending) function, hence to the breaking down of a formal whole (e.g., white light) into contrasting components (e.g., spectral colors). That definition has been more or less plausibly related to the episodic nature of Varèse's composition, with its many short sections in contrasting tempos. Integrals, in calculus, are expressions from which a set of functions can be derived; Varèse's title has been interpreted, accordingly, as referring to the subsumption of the many differentiated sections of the composition by that name into a unified whole. In both cases a similar phenomenon—namely, a whole broken down into a contrasting yet interrelated multiplicity—is described from differing perspectives. But so could any sonata or symphony movement. The scientific titles are evocative rather than explanatory.

*Ionisation*, the percussion piece, is perhaps easier to describe in terms of an implied program. A far grander, more romantic conception than, say, John Cage's spare, Apollonian *Imaginary Landscapes*, for all its sonic novelty (and despite its seemingly technical title) it makes easily recognized expressive gestures that aim (like the Futurists' Art of Noises, like the work of all maximalists) at a traditionally cathartic emotional effect. Nor is there anything in it of the sarcasm or satire exuded by Shostakovich's percussion entr'acte from *The Nose*, composed a few years earlier. Varèse sought a candid, forthright exaltation of a kind that had been put out of bounds by the canons of fashionable neoclassical taste; but he wanted to achieve it in a manner that truly "suffices to provide musical expression of *our* emotions and *our* conceptions,"<sup>21</sup> as he put it in a roundtable discussion, "La mécanisation de la musique," held in Paris in 1930, while *Ionisation* was in progress.

Beginning darkly and quietly, with siren tones of "curving" pitch and indeterminate "flowing" expanse, *Ionisation* musters increasingly definite rhythms (like the abrupt unison hemiolas at 7), mounting volume (like the entrance of the high and low anvils [*enclumes*] at 9), and a gradually rising tessitura until it reaches a blazing climax that seems to engender fixed musical pitch (piano, tubular chimes, glockenspiel at 13) as if it were the outcome or precipitate of the electrochemical reaction named in the title.

Between them, *Ionisation* and *Ecuatorial* could be said to bring the complementary futurist and neoprimitivist impulses in twentieth-century music to a climax and a temporary conclusion, for after them came a long silence. Between 1934 and 1954, Varèse completed only three works, none of them very substantial: *Densité 21.5*, a sixty-one-measure composition for unaccompanied flute, written in 1936 on commission from the flautist Georges Barrère, who wanted a showpiece to inaugurate his new platinum instrument (21.5 being the specific gravity or density of platinum as it was then measured); *Étude pour Espace* (Study for "Space"), a short chorus accompanied by two pianos and percussion (performed once in 1947 but never published), excerpted from a grandiose choral symphony on which Varèse worked sporadically for decades but never finished; and *Dance for Burgess*, composed at the request of the actor Burgess Meredith, a friend, for a projected Broadway show, but never performed.

During the 1940s Varèse dropped into obscurity. His earlier fame, unsupported by ongoing performances or recordings, lapsed into a reputation for eccentricity. The most characteristic glimpse of him during the silent decade came by way of Henry Miller, an American surrealist writer widely regarded at the time as a pornographer, who included a chapter on Varèse, first published by a London arts magazine, in a collection of travel essays about America, *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, that appeared in 1945. It was called "With Edgar Varèse in the Gobi Desert," and it opened with a scenario Varèse had sketched for *Espace*, the never-to-be-

finished choral symphony, in 1929. It reads like a high-tech updating of Scriabin's similarly unfinished and unfinishable theosophical *Mysterium*, and provides a fitting epitaph for the spent maximalist impulse:

The world awake! Humanity on the march. Nothing can stop it. A conscious humanity neither exploitable nor pitiable. Marching! Going! They march! Millions of feet endlessly tramping, treading, pounding, striding. Rhythms change: quick, slow, staccato, dragging, treading, pounding, striding. GO! The final crescendo giving the impression that confidently, pitilessly, the going will never stop ... projecting itself into space ...

Voices in the sky, as though magic, invisible hands were turning on and off the knobs of fantastic radios, filling all space, criss-crossing, overlapping, penetrating each other, splitting up, superimposing, repulsing each other, colliding, crashing. Phrases, slogans, utterances, chants, proclamations: China, Russia, Spain, the Fascist states and the opposing Democracies, all breaking their paralyzing crusts.

What should be avoided: tones of propaganda, as well as any journalistic speculation on timely events and doctrines. I want the epic impact of our epoch, stripped of its mannerisms and snobbisms. I suggest using here and there snatches of phrases from American, French, Russian, Chinese, Spanish, German revolutions: shooting stars, also words recurring like pounding hammer blows or throbbing in an underground ostinato, stubborn and ritualistic.

I should like an exultant, even prophetic tone—incantatory, the writing, however, lean and bare, stripped for action, almost like the account of a prizefight, blow for blow, the audience kept keyed-up, tense and unconscious of the style of the announcer. Also some phrases out of folklore—for the sake of their human, near-the-earth quality. I want to encompass everything that is human, from the most primitive to the farthest reaches of science.<sup>22</sup>

“What sort of proclamation can this be?” Miller wrote. “An anarchist running amok? A Sandwich Islander on the war-path? No, my friends, these are the words of Edgar Varèse, a composer.”<sup>23</sup> The tone, meant as sympathetic, made it hard to take the described subject very seriously. Even to enthusiasts like Miller, maximalism had reached the point where preemptive caricature was required. “What interests me about Varèse,” he went on, “is the fact that he seems unable to get a hearing.”<sup>24</sup> But it was not only the indifference of those committed to the “mannerisms and snobbisms” of the neoclassical revival that marginalized Varèse. He was at a technological impasse, imagining a music that could not be realized in actual sound.

## Notes:

(19) Edgard Varèse, “The Liberation of Sound,” in *Perspectives on American Composers*, eds. Benjamin Boretz and Edward T. Cone (New York: Norton, 1971), p. 32.

(20) Edgard Varèse, *Ecuatorial* (New York: Ricordi, 1934), prefatory note.

(21) Quoted in Fernand Ouellette, *Edgard Varese*, trans. Derek Coltman (New York: Orion Press, 1968), p. 104.

(22) Henry Miller, *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (New York: New Directions, 1945), pp. 163–64.

(23) *Ibid.* p. 164.

(24) *Ibid.* p. 165.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Pierre Schaeffer

Electro-acoustic music

Karlheinz Stockhausen

## “REAL” VS. “PURE”

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 4 The Third Revolution

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

It was the advent of the tape recorder, the development described at the beginning of this chapter, that rescued Varèse from his creative hiatus and brought about something of a futurist resurgence, coinciding with the emergence of the postwar avant-garde. That made it possible to look upon Varèse's compositions of the 1920s and 1930s not only as quaintly heroic echoes of an exhausted past but, just as plausibly, as harbingers of an abundant future. He found himself cast as a mentor to a new generation of composers, and became the only member of his generation to apply himself to the new technology of “organized sound,”<sup>25</sup> to use the term Varèse offered (in an article published in 1940) as a means of evading “the monotonous question: ‘But is it music?’” The question was inevitable, since the new medium of electronic music was able at last to fulfill John Cage's prediction of 1940 and “MAKE AVAILABLE FOR MUSICAL PURPOSES ANY AND ALL SOUNDS THAT CAN BE HEARD,” and do it in a way that was entirely practicable. (Cage, too, had offered, “if the word ‘music’ is sacred,” to call the activity he foresaw “organization of sound” and the composer an “organizer of sound.”) That meant all at once admitting to the domain of music a wide variety of sounds for which no musical notation existed and to which no existing rules of composition were applicable. But as Varèse somewhat gloomily predicted in “The Liberation of Sound,” “I am afraid it will not be long before some musical mortician begins embalming electronic music in rules.”<sup>26</sup>

From the beginning, composers of electronic music formed themselves into two main camps, replicating the division that previously existed between the Futurists, who wished to encompass the whole universe of life-sounds into their music, and the Synthesists, as we may call them, who sought sounds specific to the new medium (hence detached, in the manner of abstract art, from the sound repertory of lived reality). The former, who came first chronologically, were the composers of *musique concrète*, a music that advertised itself, and sought its justification, on the basis of its relationship to the sound-world of “concrete” sensory reality.

The term was coined in 1948 by Pierre Schaeffer (1910–95), a sound engineer employed in Paris by the Radiodiffusion française, the French national broadcasting network. The idea went back directly to Filippo Marinetti's prewar *sintesi radiofonici*, and indeed, Schaeffer's first *concrète* compositions were made by montaging sounds preserved on phonograph discs, usually in “locked grooves” that created ostinatos the way tape loops would later do. One of the earliest such pieces, *Concert de bruits* (“Concert of noises”), broadcast over the French radio in 1948, harks back even in its title to the language of Futurism. Its movements included an *Étude aux chemins de fer* (“Railroad study”) and an *Étude aux casseroles* (“Saucepan study”). A couple of Schaeffer's early studies, *Étude violette* and *Étude noire*, were based on the sounds of Pierre Boulez's piano playing.



fig. 4-4 Pierre Schaeffer, pioneer of *musique concrète*.

Schaeffer was quick, however, to avail himself of the new possibilities of splicing and of speed and envelope alteration that the new medium of tape editing allowed. Together with Pierre Henry (b. 1927), another sound engineer at the radio studio who had had some formal training in composition, Schaeffer founded the Groupe de Recherche de Musique Concrète (1950), and began issuing fully formed compositions on tape: the first was called *Symphonie pour un homme seul* ("Symphony for one man alone"), and consisted entirely of manipulated body sounds, not limited to those produced by the speech organs. The masterpiece of the original musique concrète studio was Henry's *Orphée*, or "The Veil of Orpheus" (1953), a ritualistic drama, existing only as sounds on tape, that graphically enacts the death of Orpheus, torn limb from limb by the Bacchantes. The voyeuristic (or should we call it auditeuristic) preoccupation with violence completes the parallel with Futurism. It provoked a violent counterdemonstration from the audience at Donaueschingen in 1953.

Once tape recorders were installed, many of the prominent postwar avant-gardists, including Messiaen, Boulez, and Stockhausen, paid visits to Schaeffer's studio at Paris Radio. But after a couple of desultory experiments they drifted off again. Only Xenakis stayed, working with musique concrète into the 1960s, and reveling like Henry in a poetry of violence that, in his case, served to sublimate his wartime experiences in works like *Diamorphoses* (1957), which incorporated the sounds of jet engines, earthquakes, and automobile crashes.

The Darmstadt "zero hour" impulse required a different high-tech outlet: that of *elektronische Musik*, which in its original German formulation did not have the general applicability of its English counterpart, "electronic music," but referred to music based exclusively on electronically synthesized sounds—the purer, the better. Synthetic sounds carried no stigma from the world of entertainment, whereas the often amusing or terrifying musique concrète was reminiscent of radio sound effects and the soundtracks of films or animated cartoons. For composers in the Germanic modernist orbit, who set enormous store by the romantic concepts of *ernste Musik* ("serious music," as against "entertainment") and of artistic autonomy, the neutrality of synthesized sound, its



freedom from worldly associations, constituted its chief appeal. (They were obviously unaware of the associations that had accrued to the theremin, and later to the trautonium, in Hollywood.)

The German hub of operations for electronic music, as mentioned in chapter 1, was the studio at Radio Cologne that was set up in 1951 with the aid of the American occupying forces, under the direction of Herbert Eimert (1897–1972). Eimert, an early follower of Schoenberg and an authority on twelve-tone music, saw electronic music not as “the great opening up of music to all sounds” that Cage had predicted, but rather as a source of new “parameters” for serial manipulation (overtones, for example, governing timbre), extending the serial reach far beyond what was measurable or controllable on conventionally played instruments. “It is certain that no means of musical control could have been established over electronic material had it not been for the revolutionary thought of Anton Webern,” Eimert asserted. “Talk of ‘humanized’ electronic sound may be left to unimaginative instrument makers,”<sup>27</sup> he added with characteristic intolerance. We know by now whom he had in mind.

The symptomatic early electronic compositions from Cologne were the two serial *Studien* (1953, 1954) by Stockhausen, constructed from the purest sound of all, that of “sine waves,” single frequencies without any overtones, obtainable only under laboratory conditions in the studio, never in nature. They are produced by audio generators or oscillators, which can be programmed to emit sounds with prespecified, artificially simple overtone structures, all named from the way their waves look when analyzed by another studio instrument, called the oscilloscope, and displayed on its screen.

The overtoneless signal produces a waveform like a sine curve as plotted by trigonometry students on graph paper. A signal with artificially emphasized even partials produces a waveform with flat peaks, and is therefore called a square wave. One that emphasizes the odd partials looks like the cutting edge of a saw on the screen and is called the sawtooth wave. Another generator produces “white noise,” the hissing sound of the full frequency spectrum in simultaneous display. White noise can be processed through a “band-pass filter” to produce sounds of indefinite pitch but identifiable register. Other sound-modifying devices include modulators and reverberators. The first suppresses the fundamentals of two sounds and replaces them with their sums and/or differences; the second enhances sounds by allowing them to echo in an acoustical chamber of variable size.

Stockhausen's *Elektronische Studie II* (1954) was the first electronic composition to be issued not only as a prerecorded tape but also as a published score (Fig. 4-5). The notation resembles conventional musical notation insofar as it is a pair of grids, a vertical grid to represent greater and lesser quantities and a horizontal grid to represent elapsing time. It has three levels. The one on top measures the frequency range of the sine-wave bands in hertz, or cycles-per-second (cps). The one in the middle is a simple centimeter scale to measure duration (at a rate of 76.2 centimeters of unscrolling tape per second). At bottom is a dynamic scale to measure increasing and decreasing sound volume in decibels. The relationship between diagonals and verticals represents the sound “envelope”: a vertical line represents a sudden attack or cutoff. Diagonals, depending on their declivities, represent faster or slower crescendos and decrescendos. As already observed in chapter 1, the relationship between the score and the sound in an electronic composition is not the usual one, since there are no performers whose actions need to be prescribed. Conceivably, the score of Stockhausen's study could be used to duplicate the composition in the studio, as an architect's plan can be used to duplicate a building. But there is no practical need for such duplication in the case of electronic music, since a second tape recorder can instantly and automatically record, hence duplicate in playback, the sounds emitted by the original tape.

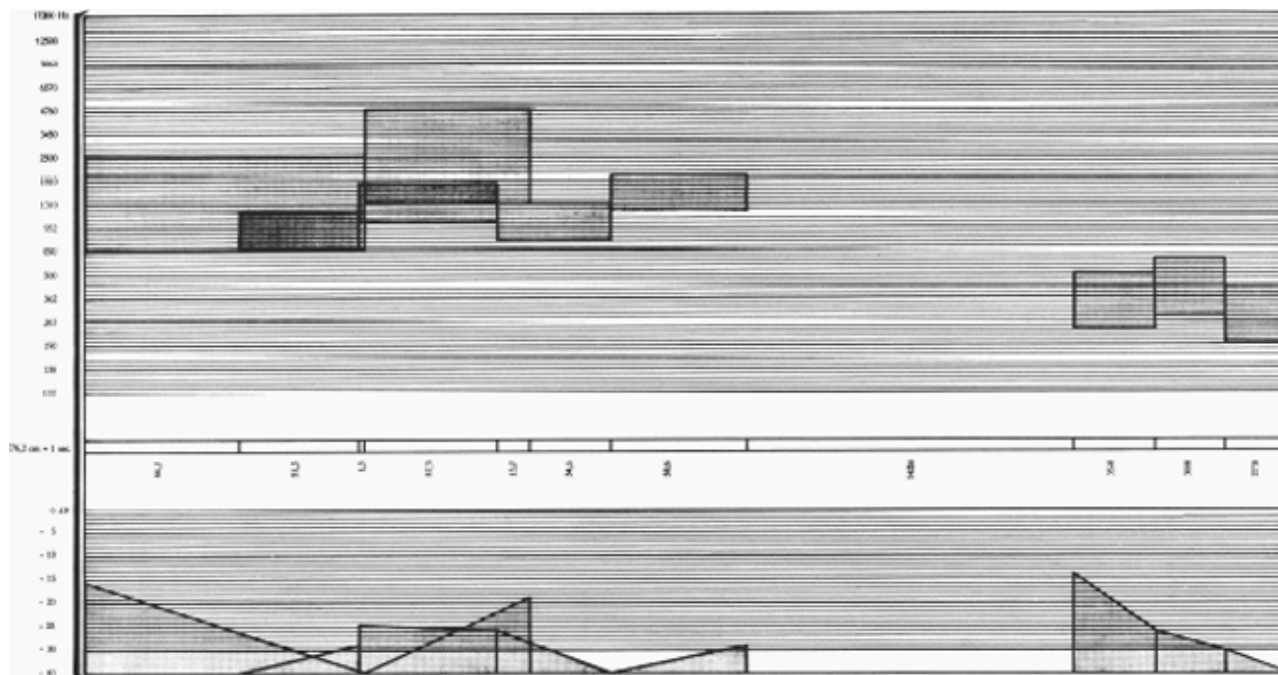


fig. 4-5 Karlheinz Stockhausen, *Elektronische Studie II* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1954).

There is even less practical justification for the “Hörpartitur” created ex post facto for *Artikulation*, Ligeti's Cologne exercise of 1958, described and displayed in chapter 60. Its status was rather that of a poster or an art print advertising the work of the studio (and, in cold-war terms, advertising the support “Western” governments were prepared to invest in avant-garde activities for their propaganda value). But that was not the only propaganda context into which the new musical medium was inserted from its very infancy. The rivalry between *musique concrète* and *elektronische Musik* quickly became the latest bout in the old contest between French *clarté* and *esprit* (clarity and wit) and German *Tiefgründigkeit* (profundity), and between the agreeable naturalness of French art and the labored artifice of German. An official statement issued by the Groupe de Recherche de Musique Concrète and reprinted on the first European commercial recording of tape music (*Panorama de “Musique Concrète,”* issued in 1957 under the auspices of UNESCO), started right off with the warning:

One of the most common errors with regard to *musique concrète* is to confuse it with its very different rival, Electronic Music, which originated in Germany and which is entirely concerned with the *artificial*, electronic manufacture of sounds, built up from a basic sinus tone. In truth, so far from eschewing “sound realism” by relying on the electron, *musique concrète* makes use of real sounds, which are natural, rather than synthetic, in order to rework them with the aid of special instruments such as the tape recorder (*phonogène*).... *Musique concrète* stems more from acoustics, therefore, than from electronics.<sup>28</sup>

This mini cold war was breached somewhat in 1956 with Stockhausen's *Gesang der Jünglinge* (“Song of the youths”), an electronic fantasy inspired by the parable from the biblical Book of Daniel about the survival of the Three Holy Children Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Nebuchadnezzar's burning fiery furnace. The music places the sound of a boy's voice chanting the biblical text together with electronically synthesized signals, but the two layers are kept distinct. Even the recorded voice was manipulated according to serialist principles, as were the “trajectories” by which the sound was circulated among the five groups of playback loudspeakers that were set up for the first performances. (The version of *Gesang der Jünglinge* that was issued on a commercial stereo disc a few years later had to be mixed down to two channels, so that much of the serially structured “directionality” of the original was lost.) The second version of Stockhausen's *Kontakte* (1960) breached another

divide: it adds a layer of live performed music (piano and percussion) to a previously completed "pure" electronic score of the same name (1959), thus bridging the gap between music performed in real time, in which notation carries out its usual task, and music definitively fixed on tape without mediation. The piece also marked a veer away from strict serialism toward the collage-like "moment form" that Stockhausen developed as a response to Cage's indeterminacy.

Later still, Stockhausen began applying his collage techniques to concrete sounds, often prerecorded music. His *Hymnen* (1967) is based on the sounds of national anthems from around the world, often set together in a kind of electronic counterpoint that Stockhausen called "intermodulation," whereby the sounds of two or more anthems would be mutually modified by the use of a ring modulator, the studio device that adds and subtracts the frequencies of sounds while suppressing their fundamentals. Stockhausen intended intermodulation as a metaphor for international cooperation, or, more generally, for "the universality of past, present and future, of distant places and spaces."<sup>29</sup> Like Scriabin a half century before him, the composer began to advertise (and perhaps conceive of) his music as a means for actually producing the social and historical changes that it symbolized. Like Cage, Stockhausen began at this point to assume the role of a spiritual guru.

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## Notes:

(25) *Perspectives on American Composers*, p. 32.

(26) *Ibid.*

(27) Herbert Eimert, "What Is Electronic Music?" *Die Reihe* (English-language edition, trans. Leo Black) I (1959): 6, 9.

(28) *Panorama of Musique Concrète* (London/Ducretet-Thomson DTL 93090).

(29) Karlheinz Stockhausen, liner notes to *Hymnen für elektronische und konkrete Klänge*, Elektronische Realisation WDR Köln (Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft 139421/22 Stereo).

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

**See also from Grove Music Online**

Electronic sound: History of recording

Vladimir Ussachevsky

Luciano Berio

## THE NEW TECHNOLOGY SPREADS

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 4 The Third Revolution

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

Tape music came to America somewhat by accident. Vladimir Ussachevsky (1911–90), then an instructor in music at Columbia University, obtained a grant in 1951 to purchase a pair of Ampex tape recorders on behalf of the department for recording “Composers Forum” concerts on campus for library preservation. The tape recorders and microphones were stored between concerts at Ussachevsky's home or in his office, and he began amusing himself by recording and transforming the sounds of his own piano playing, eventually with the help of an engineer from the university radio station, who created a device for obtaining and controlling “feedback,” a type of mechanical reverberation produced by feeding the output of a tape playback into the same tape recorder's recording head.

Ussachevsky presented some of these “experiments,” frankly so called, at a Composers Forum of his own on 8 May 1952. Only one, “Underwater Valse” (a demonstration of feedback) was given the dignity of a title. A review by Henry Cowell, in his day also an enthusiastic experimenter with new sounds, welcomed the feedback device less as a technical breakthrough than for the poetic feelings that it evoked. That would be typical of American *musique concrète*, which generally preferred to work its surrealist transformations on prerecorded musical sounds rather than on “natural” or environmental ones. Of the feedback, Cowell remarked that

One would not expect such a series of mechanical repetitions to be related to human experience, yet to nearly everyone the effect seems to suggest some half-forgotten, elusive experience. Several people have testified independently that the sounds correspond to what is heard at one level of consciousness during the process of going under an anesthetic; others recall having heard such automatic sounds in dreams.<sup>30</sup>

Ussachevsky's extension and expansion of instrumental ranges and timbres was also acclaimed. “An A two octaves below the lowest A on the piano was produced by playing a recording of the lowest A at one-fourth speed,” Cowell marveled. “The fundamental pitch was inaudible, but its powerful low overtones produced an otherwise unheard-of timbre.” Whether experiments or compositions, these early efforts of Ussachevsky's were issued on a commercial recording (*Sounds of New Music*, Folkways, 1958) that gave them permanent status as the earliest “classics” of American electronic music.

One of Ussachevsky's Columbia colleagues, Otto Luening (1900–96), had been a disciple of Busoni's in Switzerland during and immediately after World War I, and was therefore predisposed to take a lively interest in Ussachevsky's tape experiments, seeing in them the promise of finally realizing Busoni's romantic vision of “free music.” He invited Ussachevsky to present his experiments that summer at a composers' conference in Bennington, Vermont, and, a former professional flautist, began making experiments alongside him, so that the early sound repertoire of American *musique concrète* now included the manipulated sonorities of their two instruments, along with sounds of percussion and of conversational speech.

The results of their summer's work were unveiled at a widely publicized and reported concert of "tape music" held on 28 October 1952 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Leopold Stokowski, the superstar conductor who had led the premiere performance of Fuleihan's theremin concerto during the war, and of Varèse's *Amériques* before that, was on hand to lend some glamour to the occasion and to make some introductory remarks. They were remarkably to the point: "I am often asked: What is tape music, and how is it made? Tape music is music that is composed directly with sound instead of first being written on paper and later made to sound. Just as the painter paints his picture directly with colors, so the musician composes his music directly with tone."<sup>31</sup> In the audience that evening, entranced, was Luciano Berio, then living in the United States on a fellowship. On his return home, he made contact with Bruno Maderna, the somewhat older Italian avant-gardist who had already taught at Darmstadt and worked both at the Paris musique concrète studio and at the Cologne studio for *elektronische Musik*. Together they established the Studio di Fonologia Musicale at the state-supported radio station in Milan, for which Berio received funding by agreeing to furnish electronic soundtrack music for a series of films to be shown on Italian television.

The Milan studio, thanks to its exceptionally well endowed facilities, its attendant concert series and newsletter, and above all the government grant money it was authorized to dispense, became another magnet, alongside Darmstadt, for international talent. Its first creative emission, a joint composition by the two directors, was *Ritratto di città* ("Portrait of a city"), a collage of city sounds through the course of a working day, assembled in conscious tribute to the pioneering efforts of the *futuristi* for broadcast over the station that supported the studio.

Three of the early classics of the emerging repertoire of tape music were created at the Milan studio. The philosophy that reigned there was intentionally eclectic, in implied criticism of the respective purisms of Paris and Cologne, and the works produced covered the gamut of existing techniques. Berio's *Thema* (1958), subtitled "Omaggio a Joyce," is widely regarded as a masterpiece (perhaps *the* masterpiece) of musique concrète. Its sound source was a reading by the composer's wife, the American singer Cathy Berberian (1925–83), of the first page from the eleventh chapter ("Sirens") of James Joyce's epic novel *Ulysses* (1922):

- Bronze by gold heard the hoofirons, steelyringing.
- Imperthnthn thnthnthn.
- Chips, picking chips off rocky thumbnail, chips.
- Horrid! And gold flushed more.
- 5 A husky fifenote blew.
- Blew. Blue bloom is on the.
- Goldpinnacled hair.
- A jumping rose on satiny breast of satin, rose of Castile.
- Trillin, trilling: Idolores.
- 10 Peep! Who's in the .... peepofgold?
- Tink cried to bronze in pity.
- And a call, pure, long and throbbing. Longindying call.
- Decoy. Soft word. But look: the bright stars fade.
- Notes chirruping answer.
- 15 O rose! Castile. The morn is breaking.
- Jingle jingle jaunted jingling.
- Coin rang. Clock clacked.
- Avowal. *Sonnez*. I could. Rebound of garter. Not leave thee.
- Smack. *La cloche!* Thigh smack. Avowal. Warm.
- 20 Sweetheart, goodbye!
- Jingle. Bloo.
- Boomed crashing chords. When love absorbs. War! War!

- The tympanum.
- A sail! A veil awave upon the waves.
- 25 Lost. Throstle fluted. All is lost now.
- Horn. Hawhorn.
- When first he saw. Alas!
- Full tup. Full throb.
- Warbling. Ah, lure! Alluring.
- 30 Martha! Come!
- Clapclap. Clipclap. Clappyclap.
- Goodgod henev erheard inall.
- Deaf bald Pat brought pad knife took up.
- A moonlit nightcall: far, far.
- 35 I feel so sad. P. S. So lonely blooming.
- Listen!
- The spiked and winding cold seahorn. Have you the? Each, and for other,
- splash and silent roar. Pearls: when she. Liszt's rhapsodies. Hissss.

This prose poem represents music overheard by several of the novel's characters as they walk the streets of Dublin. It is virtual verbal music, reverberating with sounds of hoof beats (*thnthnthn*), coins in pockets (*jingle jingle*), birds at dawn (*notes chirruping answer*), foghorns (*far, far*). It plays with homophones (*Blew. Blue bloom; Ah, lure! Alluring*) and alliterations (*Liszt's rhapsodies. Hissss*) like surrealist song poetry. It names instruments (fife, tympanum, flute, horn), and even alludes to (or parodies) the titles of once-famous songs and arias: "When the Bloom Is on the Rye" (l. 6); "Goodbye, Sweetheart, Goodbye" (l. 20); "Tutto è sciolto" (All Is Lost) from Bellini's opera *La sonnambula* (l. 25); "M'appari" (When First I Saw) from Flotow's opera *Martha* (l. 27); "Tis the last rose of summer/Left blooming alone" (l. 35). There is even applause (*Clipclap. Clappyclap*). The whole chapter is often compared with a musical composition replete with thematic development, "tonal" modulation, onomatopoeia, counterpoint, recapitulations and so on, though literary analysts differ as to what form—sonata? fugue?—is being mimicked.

Berio took Joyce's own procedures as his point of departure, "emphasizing and developing," as he put it, "the transition between a perceivable verbal message and musical utterance"<sup>32</sup> that is already present in the original. By filtering the sound of the read text, copying it, cutting and splicing it, altering its speed, reversing it, and setting it in counterpoint (and sometimes in homophony) with itself, the composer converts the words into trills, glissandos, portamentos, and staccatos, turning what was discontinuous in the original into continuous sounds (*Lisztiszt'shisssssssss*) or breaking what was rhythmically continuous in the original into periodic fragments. Sometimes the process works the other way, proceeding by degrees from musical sound to intelligible speech, blurring even further than Joyce did the line dividing onomatopoeia from semantics. Either way, "I attempted to establish a new relationship between speech and music, in which a discontinuous metamorphosis of one into the other can be developed."<sup>33</sup> As Joel Chadabe, a composer and historian of electronic music, has commented, "Berio said it, but Joyce might have said it as well."<sup>34</sup>

By contrast, *Scambi* (1957), by the Belgian composer Henri Pousseur (b. 1929), eschewed concrete sounds in favor of synthetic ones. The title means "quick changes," or "exchanges," and is based throughout on filtered white noise. The composer compared the process of composing it to sonic sculpture: just as Michelangelo claimed that to make a statue all one had to know was what parts of the marble block to remove, all it took to make electronic music out of white noise was knowing which parts of the sonic spectrum to block when. Inspired by Cage's lectures on indeterminacy, Pousseur cast *Scambi* as an "open form": a set of specifications for filtering, volume settings, and reverberation that could be variously realized in the studio.

The version that was released commercially is the one the composer himself realized at the Milan studio, which (over his protests, so to speak) has become the "canonical" one. Berio, in collaboration with the composer, made

another realization to show that it could be done, and so have various composers and studio technicians in Europe and the United States. But traditional notions of authorship have proven hardy. Despite commitment to the superficial freedom of “open form,” moreover, *Scambi* represents an effort, characteristic of its time, to maintain traditional reliance on a prescriptive score in a medium that threatened the preeminence of writing and the social hierarchy that writing had always underwritten.

Communicating music from composer to performers (or, as here, to “realizers”) through writing elevates the one to the status of commander and lowers the others to the status of slaves. Electronic music promised liberation from this social relation, by turning the composer into a direct and independent maker of an object comparable to those produced by a painter or a poet. Varèse had looked forward to the electronic medium as the composer's savior. “The composer,” he complained in the manifesto of 1921, “is the only one of the creators of today who is denied direct contact with the public.”<sup>35</sup> The tape medium promised to eliminate the middleman, the performer; but in that case there would be no one to give orders to. That may be one reason why composers of electronic music seem in retrospect to have been so slow to greet it (or even see it) as the harbinger of a postliterate age.

Another early tape composer who relied extensively on scores was Cage, who welcomed the electronic medium as the answer to all his prayers, but who in the 1950s employed it as just another way of filling his chance-predetermined “containers.” These precompositional plans or composing scores, on which Cage had been basing his compositions even before discovering chance operations, went on controlling his compositional acts even after the advent of tape recording. Paradoxically, moreover, the use of taped sounds made the process of “indeterminate” composing more arduous than ever.

At Berio's invitation, Cage came to Milan in 1958 to make an electronic realization for *Fontana Mix* (a graphic sound container that he had already prepared and filled with live performance sounds), as an accompaniment to *Aria*, a collage of vocal sounds that he wrote for Cathy Berberian. The principle of tape composition in *Fontana Mix* was similar to the one Cage had previously employed in *Williams Mix* (1952), his first electronic composition. The idea of both pieces went directly back to the epigraph to this chapter, Cage's futuristic fantasy of a universal music that claimed “FOR MUSICAL PURPOSES ANY AND ALL SOUNDS THAT CAN BE HEARD.”

*Williams Mix* was realized with the help of Cage's friends Louis and Bebe Barron, who had set up a little electronic music studio in their apartment where they produced soundtracks for science fiction films, eventually including some famous ones like *Forbidden Planet* (1956). Cage copied from them an encyclopedic library of about six hundred different recorded sounds. He cut them up into countless tape snippets, which he then stored by size in about 175 envelopes inside six big boxes labeled A through F, as follows:

- A. City sounds
- B. Country sounds
- C. Electronic sounds
- D. Manually produced sounds, including “normal” music
- E. Wind-produced sounds, including voice
- F. Small sounds requiring amplification to be heard.

Using the *I Ching* as described in chapter 2, Cage devised the score. Snippets from the six boxes would be spliced into eight tracks for simultaneous playback, each track a mosaic of snippets defined by coin-tossing according to source, duration, pitch, loudness, and manner of cutting. The first task was to compile a gigantic list of coin-

determined specifications to guide the splicing of the master tape. As Earle Brown, who volunteered to act as Cage's technical assistant for the project, recalled:

Anybody could toss the three coins and write down heads, heads, tails, do it again, tails, heads, heads, do it again, oh, three tails .... Anybody could do it, so when anybody would come to visit, John would hand them three coins and tell them how to do it and everybody would be sitting around tossing coins. That was the composing part of it.<sup>36</sup>

The list of coin tosses was translated into a visual representation of each track of tape, drawn actual size. Then came the hard part. Putting the score under a plate of glass on a big table, Cage and Brown cut and spliced tape, laying the fragments end to end right over the score, as if following a dressmaker's pattern. They worked for five months straight, from ten in the morning until five in the afternoon.

We'd go over and paw through the envelopes until we came to the right one, as called for by the chance process. We'd pick up the envelope, take the piece of tape over, lay the tape on top of the glass under which was the score, and cut and splice exactly as was called for. Then we applied the pieces of recording tape onto splicing tape and then, between pieces of recording tape, we rubbed talcum powder so the splicing tape wouldn't be sticky. After we did this, and we'd gotten a minute or so finished, we used to go over to a studio in New Jersey to make copies on a solid piece of tape. We didn't even have a tape machine. We couldn't hear anything. All we had were razor blades and talcum powder, no tape machine, it's true. If we'd needed to use one, we could have gone to the Barrons' studio. But John was doing it by chance. He didn't need to hear. You only need to hear when you're doing something by taste. It took so long, so bloody long, and it was boring to do all that cutting and splicing. John and I sat at opposite sides of the table and we talked about everything in the world.<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, electronic music in its infancy was probably the most labor-intensive musical medium in all of history. The attraction of the Milan Studio for Cage, when he received the invitation from Berio to produce another "mix," was the presence there of a random number generator to take the place of the coin tossing. The cutting and splicing, however, remained. *Fontana Mix*, which draws on an assortment of sounds provided by the studio and by Radio Italiana, is much shorter than *Williams Mix*. Even so, it took four months to realize. Reacting out of hurt to the usual (but now especially unjust) allegation that writing "chance music" was easy, Cage began making preemptive jokes. He told one reporter, for example, that to write *Fontana Mix* he merely brought a broom into the Milan studio, swept the floor, and spliced together the leavings from everybody else's compositions.

In retrospect, of course, the hard and boring work lent a heroic aspect to the legend of the tape-music pioneers and became a point of pride. Looking back on his "Omaggio a Joyce" in a 1982 interview, Berio made the most of it:

In order to create certain effects, some sounds had to be copied sixty, seventy, and eighty times, and then spliced together. Then these tapes had to be copied further at different speeds in order to achieve new sound qualities more or less related to Cathy's original delivery of the text .... I didn't surrender to the difficulties. It's surprising now to think that I spent several months of my life cutting tape while today I could achieve many of the same results in much less time by using a computer.<sup>38</sup>

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## Notes:

(30) Henry Cowell, "Current Chronicle: New York," *Musical Quarterly* XXXVIII (1952): 600.

(31) Quoted in liner notes to *Tape Music: An Historic Concert* (Desto Records, DC 6466).



(32) "Interview with Luciano Berio," in Barry Shrader, *Introduction to Electro-Acoustic Music* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1982); quoted in Chadabe, *Electric Sound*, p. 49.

(33) Berio, "Poesia e Musica—un' esperienza," *Incontri Musicali* III (1958); quoted in Chadabe, *Electric Sound*, p. 50.

(34) *Electric Sound*, p. 50.

(35) Quoted in Ouellette, *Edgard Varèse*, p. 66.

(36) Quoted in Chadabe, *Electric Sound*, p. 56.

(37) *Ibid.* pp. 56–57.

(38) "Interview with Luciano Berio," quoted in Chadabe, *Electric Sound*, p. 50.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

See also from Grove Music Online

Otto Luening

Vladimir Ussachevsky

Milton Babbitt

Serialism

## THE BIG SCIENCE PHASE

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 4 The Third Revolution

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

Additional labor-saving steps were taken in New York, where Luening and Ussachevsky were receiving media exposure, followed by more prestigious performances and, finally, material grants. In December 1952 the pair were invited to appear on the “Today” show, then hosted by the announcer and commentator Dave Garroway. In April 1953, their pieces (including *Incantation*, their first joint composition) were included in a festival of musique concrète presented by Radiodiffusion française in Paris. Next, they received a commission from the Louisville Orchestra, funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, for a concerted piece for tape recorder and orchestra. The result, *Rhapsodic Variations*, was first performed in Louisville on 20 March 1954 and recorded the next year.

Their method of collaboration was simple: they planned the piece together, agreed on which parts each would compose, then went home and did their assignments. In all, Luening and Ussachevsky wrote three compositions that pitted electronic music against the symphony orchestra. *A Poem in Cycles and Bells* (1954) was commissioned and performed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra. The New York Philharmonic commissioned *Concerted Piece for Tape Recorder and Orchestra* (1960) for nationwide broadcast on one of Leonard Bernstein's very successful outreach programs for children.

“Lunachevsky” began receiving commissions for theatrical music as well, and this gave the “pure” medium of tape music its widest early exposure. Together they provided incidental “scores” for Orson Welles's 1956 production of *King Lear* at New York's City Center and the 1958 Theater Guild production of Shaw's *Back to Methuselah*. Ussachevsky alone supplied a short electronic sequence to supplement the soundtrack music for Alfred Hitchcock's movie *To Catch a Thief* (1955). Another work of his, *Linear Contrasts* (1958), which included electronically synthesized sounds in addition to transformations of prerecorded musical instruments, was given its premiere at the Baden-Baden Festival in Germany.

Quite unexpectedly, two very conventionally trained musicians had become New York's dynamic duo of the avant-garde, and the very conservative music department where they taught—until then a bastion of neoclassical Americana under the stewardship of the opera specialist Douglas Moore (1893–1969), a pupil and disciple of the ultra-respectable Horatio Parker—found itself on the cutting edge of new music technology. Luening and Ussachevsky began attracting grant money to their institution, which purchased for them more equipment (like the oscillators Ussachevsky began using for the *King Lear* music and the *Piece for Tape Recorder* that derived from it) and in 1955 endowed an on-campus electronic music studio, America's first institutional home for the medium.



**fig. 4-6 Otto Luening and Vladimir Ussachevsky in the small teaching studio behind McMillan (now Miller) Theater at Columbia University, ca. 1960.**

The studio moved from a two-story guardhouse that had formerly belonged to an insane asylum to a room behind the campus theater where the Composers Forum concerts were held, to large quarters in a building otherwise devoted to engineering offices. These quarters were made necessary by the purchase, thanks to a \$175,000 Rockefeller Foundation grant in 1959, of the RCA Mark II music synthesizer, a gigantic machine that occupied an entire wall. It had about 750 vacuum tubes and a mechanism that activated a multitude of binary switches by scanning punched cards. It could produce tones of minutely specifiable pitch, duration, and timbre, thus bringing these “parameters” under unprecedentedly minute control. Nevertheless, the romance of difficulty still attached to the process, even though the whole cutting-and-splicing phase was eliminated. Milton Babbitt's reminiscences, speaking from the vantage point of the 1990s (that is, the age of personal computers), recall the many inherent problems and ad hoc solutions with relish:

The machine was extremely difficult to operate. First of all, it had a paper drive, and getting the paper through the machine and punching the holes was difficult. We were punching in binary. The machine was totally zero, nothing predetermined, and any number we punched could refer to any dimension of the machine. There was an immense number of analog oscillators but the analog sound equipment was constantly causing problems. I couldn't think of anything that you couldn't get, but other composers gave up—it was a matter of patience. Max Mathews [a Bell Laboratories engineer who was then experimenting with the electronic synthesis of speech] once said to me, “You must have the mechanical aptitude of Edison to work with that synthesizer,” and I said, “No, I've got the patience of Job.” I became irritated with the mechanics of the machine very often. I had to troubleshoot all the time and I was completely dependent upon Peter Mauzey [the lab's technical engineer]. But I learned a lot of tricks, how to cut down

on programming time with presets and so on. There were many people who would look at this machine and say, "It's a computer." But it never computed anything. It was basically just a complex switching device to an enormous and complicated analog studio hooked into a tape machine. And yet for me it was so wonderful because I could specify something and hear it instantly.<sup>39</sup>

The nature of the machine changed the nature of the music the lab produced. Under the terms of the grant, negotiated primarily by Ussachevsky on behalf of Columbia University and Babbitt on behalf of Princeton, the new electronic music studio was to be jointly administered by both music departments and called the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center. It became the model for the electronic music studios that soon mushroomed on virtually every American campus where musical composition was taught, especially those that in the 1960s began instituting doctoral programs on the Princeton model described in chapter 3.

In the process, American electronic music was to a significant degree Princetonized. It increasingly took on the characteristics, and served the purposes, described in Milton Babbitt's influential article from the inaugural issue of *Perspectives of New Music* (see chapter 3) in which "time-point" technique was first set forth, and in which the electronic medium was specified as the sole vehicle for achieving the accuracy in time discriminations at unlimited tempos that the system demanded.

But nothing in those days went unaccompanied by polemics. Even before presenting the new technique as such, Babbitt came out swinging at the musique concrète crowd:

To proceed from an assertion of what music has been to an assertion of what music, therefore, must be, is to commit a familiar fallacy; to proceed from an assertion of the properties of the electronic medium to an assertion of what music produced by this medium therefore must be, is not only to commit the same fallacy (and thus do fallacies make strange bedfellows), but to misconstrue that compositional revolution of which the electronic medium has been the enabling instrument.<sup>40</sup>

That revolution, Babbitt implied, had nothing to do with the much-vaunted expansion of sonic resources or liberation from traditional scales or organizing systems. It had, rather, to do with limits on the application of those organizing systems, both theoretical and actual. "For this revolution," Babbitt asserted,

has effected, summarily and almost completely, a transfer of the limits of musical composition from the limits of the nonelectronic medium and the human performer, not to the limits of this most extensive and flexible of media but to those more restrictive, more intricate, far less well understood limits: the perceptual and conceptual capacities of the human auditor. Therefore, although every musical composition justifiably may be regarded as an experiment, the embodiment of hypotheses as to certain specific conditions of music coherence, any electronically realized composition which employs resources singularly obtainable by electronic means, in addition, will incorporate certain premises that are either severely circumscribed by the limited confirmed knowledge of the nature of those capacities or by isolated facts of musical perception, themselves obtained mainly with the assistance of electronic media, for incorporation into the premises of the particular work.<sup>41</sup>

As Babbitt less formally expressed it, "the hand is never faster than the ear"<sup>42</sup> (that is, we can always hear more than we can manage physically to perform), but the synthesizer certainly is faster. It can easily be programmed to do what cannot be "heard"—that is, meaningfully parsed—by "the human auditory apparatus." How to keep things within limits? Only by building on the most advanced systems of the past, because "the hypotheses they exemplify already have been widely tested and confirmed," and give some assurance of structural validity. Electronic compositions, this means, cannot be judged otherwise than according to "traditional" musical criteria. And even though Babbitt takes the precaution of always putting the word "traditional" in ironic quotes, he intends no irony at all. So much for all the unprecedented, unlimited sound resources of the new medium!

They are written off in advance as musically meaningless:

At the extreme of “nontraditionalism” is the selection of an uninterpreted formal system, no interpreted instances of which have been musically validated, along with coordinative rules which, likewise, have not been validated independently. In such a case, the probability that such an unrestricted choice from such a large number of possibilities at both stages will yield a significant result is extremely small, or the result itself is likely to be virtually trivial, that is, hardly to admit nonverification.<sup>43</sup>

What is to be sought, then, is not novel sounds or liberation from existing systems but only greater precision in the application of those very systems, allowing their further expansion and elaboration along previously marked-out paths of technical advancement. The electronic medium, in this view, was not the revolutionary transformation that Busoni and Cage had foreseen, and that Varèse awaited, but only a refinement of means toward an academically sanctioned end, that end being Ph.D.-style serialism. Babbitt, it seemed to some, was the “mortician” whose arrival Varèse had glumly anticipated.

For while obviously the most conservative and restrictive view of the new medium, Babbitt's was also the best-funded one, and had the most institutional prestige. That gave it influence. Its “classic” exemplifications were the four compositions that Babbitt himself created on the Mark II synthesizer during the Columbia-Princeton Center's early years. Two of them—*Composition for Synthesizer* (1961) and *Ensembles* (1964)—were composed for tape alone; the other two—*Vision and Prayer* (1961, text by Dylan Thomas) and *Philomel* (1964, text by John Hollander)—combined synthesized sounds with soprano voice, namely that of Bethany Beardslee (b. 1927), an intensely energetic singer gifted with phenomenal accuracy of pitch and rhythm, who had become a fixture of the New York new music scene, and who was married at the time to Babbitt's pupil Godfrey Winham.

At the beginning of *Composition for Synthesizer*, his maiden venture in the electronic medium, Babbitt seemed especially determined to announce that (as he put it in a program note) “the composition is less concerned with ‘new sounds and timbres’ than with the control and specification of linear and total rhythms, loudness rhythms and relationships, and flexibility of pitch succession.”<sup>44</sup> The actual sounds seem to have been contrived with conventional instrumental timbres in mind—piano, pizzicato strings, woodwinds (clarinet or saxophone, bassoon or contrabassoon), unpitched percussion (actually closely spaced aggregates) as punctuation—so as to attract a minimum of attention to what for many composers was the primary attraction, and the primary selling point, of the medium.

Only near the end of the composition does Babbitt exercise his timbral imagination, recapitulating some familiar rhythms and contours with filtered white noise in place of exactly specified pitches. The confidently relaxed and humorous effect would have been difficult, perhaps impossible, to obtain in a real-time performance that taxed the players' concentration the way the compositions of Babbitt described in chapter 62 tended to do. That in itself is a strong argument for the electronic medium, not only as an aid to the composition of highly determined compositions like Babbitt's, but also as an aid to their enjoyment by listeners.

In *Philomel*, the medium is put to effective dramatic use. The title refers to one of the myths embodied in the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, the classical Latin poet. Philomela is the daughter of the Greek king Pandion and the sister of Procne, wife of the Thracian king Tereus. She is raped by her brother-in-law, who cuts out her tongue so that she can not accuse him. Philomela embroiders her story into a tapestry that she sends Procne, who, enraged, kills her son and serves his flesh to her husband as a meal. Tereus pursues the sisters intending to kill them, but the gods turn them all into birds: Procne becomes a nightingale, Tereus a hoopoe (the bird that fouls its own nest), and the silenced Philomela becomes the songless swallow. Ovid improved on the myth, adding both irony and poetic justice, by making Philomela the nightingale and Procne the swallow, so that the silenced woman becomes the sweetest singer in all the forest.

Hollander's poem is an interior monologue that portrays Philomela's emotional metamorphosis from the agony

of rape and pursuit to exultation at her miraculously granted vocal powers. Babbitt pits the live voice against an accompaniment that includes the same singer's taped voice as well as synthesized sound. The beginning (Ex. 4-1) shows Philomela in her silenced state, screaming inarticulately (and inwardly), her voice represented by the taped soprano, sustaining and obsessively returning to the note E, which (as one might easily guess) is the zero pitch of the tone row on which the music is constructed. While it is held, six aggregates are formed around it in whirlwind succession in a process that one analyst has likened to a twelve-voiced canon.<sup>45</sup>

The first aggregate reflects the notes of the twelve-tone row as given across the top of Ex. 4-2, their order transformed into vertical spacing (reading "down"). The whole chord thus arrived at is transposed up a semitone in m. 2 to form the second aggregate, and transposed again, down two semitones, in m. 3. These intervals of transposition invert the intervals of the row itself, and the process continues throughout the excerpt shown, although beginning with the fourth aggregate the row is presented partly verticalized as before and partly as an ordered succession, the more usual way.

The odd rhythmic compressions (four or six even notes in the time of five sixteenths in m. 3, followed by seven in the time of eight sixteenths, four in the time of three, eight in the time of thirteen, eleven in the time of seven) are artifacts of the time-point system described in chapter 3, as the use of the time signature might already suggest. Rhythms like these are obviously more easily programmed on a synthesizer than realized by human beings, whose "auditory apparatus" might have trouble distinguishing one-eleventh of a double-dotted quarter note from one-seventh of a half-tied-to-an-eighth. Using the machine grants the composer freedom from such human limitations; in terms of the "dehumanization of art" that modernists have always longed for, that freedom was indeed a breakthrough.

The image displays a musical score for the opening of Milton Babbitt's *Philomel*. The score is divided into two main sections: "Tape Voice" and "Tape".

The "Tape Voice" section consists of a single staff with a treble clef, 3/4 time signature, and a key signature of one flat. It begins with a dynamic marking of *p* and includes performance instructions such as *s = 8* and *— 8*. The notation includes various rhythmic values and accidentals.

The "Tape" section is a multi-staff arrangement. The top staff is in treble clef, and the bottom staff is in bass clef. Both are in 3/4 time and one flat. The notation is complex, featuring many accidentals, ties, and dynamic markings. Specific points in the score are labeled with *P* followed by a subscript (e.g., *P*<sub>0</sub>, *P*<sub>1</sub>, *P*<sub>11</sub>, *P*<sub>3</sub>, *P*<sub>6</sub>), indicating particular pitch classes or structural elements. Performance instructions like *s = 8* and *— 8* are also present.

ex. 4-1 Milton Babbitt, *Philomel*, opening

	I <sub>0</sub>	I <sub>11</sub>	I <sub>1</sub>	I <sub>9</sub>	I <sub>4</sub>	I <sub>6</sub>	I <sub>3</sub>	I <sub>2</sub>	I <sub>7</sub>	I <sub>8</sub>	I <sub>5</sub>	I <sub>10</sub>	
P <sub>0</sub>	<u>E</u>	E $\flat$	F	D $\flat$	A $\flat$	B $\flat$	G	G $\flat$	B	C	A	D	(←R)
P <sub>1</sub>	<u>F</u>	<u>E</u>	G $\flat$	D	A	B	A $\flat$	G	C	D $\flat$	B $\flat$	E $\flat$	
P <sub>11</sub>	<u>E<math>\flat</math></u>	<u>D</u>	<u>E</u>	C	G	A	G $\flat$	F	B $\flat$	B	A $\flat$	D $\flat$	
P <sub>3</sub>	<u>G</u>	<u>G<math>\flat</math></u>	<u>A<math>\flat</math></u>	<u>E</u>	B	D $\flat$	B $\flat$	A	D	E $\flat$	C	F	
P <sub>8</sub>	<u>C</u>	<u>B</u>	<u>D<math>\flat</math></u>	<u>A</u>	<u>E</u>	G $\flat$	E $\flat$	D	G	A $\flat$	F	B $\flat$	
P <sub>6</sub>	<u>B<math>\flat</math></u>	A	B	G	D	E	D $\flat$	C	F	G $\flat$	E $\flat$	A $\flat$	
P <sub>9</sub>	D $\flat$	C	D	B $\flat$	F	G	E	E $\flat$	A $\flat$	A	G $\flat$	B	
P <sub>10</sub>	D	D $\flat$	E $\flat$	B	G $\flat$	A $\flat$	F	E	A	B $\flat$	G	C	
P <sub>5</sub>	A	A $\flat$	B $\flat$	G $\flat$	D $\flat$	E $\flat$	C	B	E	F	D	G	
P <sub>4</sub>	A $\flat$	G	A	F	C	D	B	B $\flat$	E $\flat$	E	D $\flat$	G $\flat$	
P <sub>7</sub>	B	B $\flat$	C	A $\flat$	E $\flat$	F	D	D $\flat$	G $\flat$	G	E	A	
P <sub>2</sub>	G $\flat$	F	G	E $\flat$	B $\flat$	C	A	A $\flat$	D $\flat$	D	B	E	
													↑ (IR)

ex. 4-2 Magic square (prime-inversion matrix) for Milton Babbitt, *Philomel*

What sets *Philomel* apart from most of Babbitt's music is its representational dimension, which provides a metaphorical context for interpreting serial procedures that are more often presented as wholly abstract. The poem's dramatic plot, which ends on a note of emotional resolve, gives added resonance to Babbitt's usual habit of ending a composition with the simplest statement of his row material. The last stanzas of the poem describe the transmutation of Philomela's anguish into the nightingale's joyful song:

- Pain in the breast and mind, fused into music! Change
  - Bruising hurt silence even further! Now, in this glade,
  - Suffering is redeemed in song. Feeling takes wing:
  - High, high above, beyond the forests of horror I sing!
- 
- I sing in change
  - Now my song will range
  - Till the morning dew
  - Dampens its face:
  - Now my song will range
  - As once it flew
  - Thrashing, through
  - The woods of Thrace.

The last quatrain (Ex. 4-3) is finally sung—this once only, and to poignant effect—to the pitches of the aggregate in the basic order, P<sub>0</sub>, set forth across the top of the magic square in Ex. 4-2.



Now my song will range as once it flew thrashing through  
the woods of Thrace.

ex. 4-3 Milton Babbitt, *Philomel*, end (voice only)

## Notes:

(39) Quoted in Chadabe, *Electric Sound*, pp. 16–17.

(40) Milton Babbitt, "Twelve-Tone Rhythmic Structure and the Electronic Medium," *Perspectives of New Music* I, no. 1 (Fall 1962): 49.

(41) *Ibid.*

(42) Milton Babbitt, *Words about Music*, eds. Stephen Dembski and Joseph N. Straus (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 173.

(43) "Twelve-Tone Rhythmic Structure," p. 50.

(44) Liner note to "Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center" (Columbia Records MS 6566, 1964).

(45) Richard Swift, "Some Aspects of Aggregate Composition," *Perspectives of New Music* XIV/2–XV/1 (1976): 241.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Edgard Varèse

Electro-acoustic music

## A HAPPY ENDING

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 4 The Third Revolution

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

Nevertheless, Babbitt's remarks about taking the limits of the “auditory apparatus” as the limits of compositional technique have to be balanced, as always, against the inevitable slippage between what can be conceptualized in the act of composition (or analysis) and what can be parsed by the mind's ear in the act of listening. For those who consider that to be a problem, the electronic medium offers no solution. Among those who did so consider it was Varèse. Babbitt has recalled Varèse's excitement when he came up to the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center and was given a demonstration of the Mark II synthesizer's capabilities. But Varèse has recorded his dismay at the paltry use to which the machine was being put, as he saw it, by the *pompiers des douze sons*<sup>46</sup> (“bureaucrats of the twelve tones”), as he put it (in a whisper) to Stravinsky, and what he took to be the musically insignificant outcome of all the arduous precompositional planning that went into such administration.

More diplomatically, for publication, Varèse put it this way:

I am not impressed by most of today's electronic music. It does not seem to make full use of the unique possibilities of the medium, especially in regard to those questions of space and projection that have always concerned me. I am fascinated by the fact that through electronic means one can generate a sound instantaneously. On an instrument played by a human being you have to impose a musical thought through notation, then, usually much later, the player has to prepare himself in various ways to produce what will—one hopes—emerge as that sound. This is all so indirect compared with electronics, where you generate something “live” that can appear or disappear instantly and unpredictably. Consequently, you aren't programming something musical, something to be done, but using it directly, which gives an entirely different dimension to musical space and projection .... To me, working with electronic music is composing with living sounds, paradoxical though that may appear. [...] I respect the twelve-tone discipline, and those who feel they need such discipline. But it seems much more fruitful to use the total sonic resources available to us .... I respect and admire Milton Babbitt, but he certainly represents a completely different view of electronic music from mine. It seems to me that he wants to exercise maximum control over certain materials, as if he were above them. But I want to be *in* the material, part of the acoustical vibration, so to speak. Babbitt composes his material first and then gives it to the synthesizer, while I want to generate something directly by electronic means .... I do not want an *a priori* control of all its aspects.<sup>47</sup>

By the time he made these comments (1964), Varèse had managed, despite his advanced years (and his inability to work the electronic equipment without technical assistance), to produce three electronic compositions of his own, which he regarded as the crowning works of his career.

Having received the gift of an Ampex tape recorder, arranged by a painter friend in 1953, Varèse took the machine exactly where a Futurist might have been expected to take it, to iron foundries, sawmills, and other factories in and around Philadelphia. These sounds, augmented by recordings of gongs and other percussion

instruments that he kept at home, provided the raw material for three tropes or interpolations of “organized sound” that impinged upon and commented on the music played by a typical Varèsian ensemble of four woodwind players on nine instruments, ten brass (including both bass and contrabass tubas), a piano, and five percussionists manning forty-eight instruments, in *Déserts*, his last big piece. He began writing it in 1949, adopting for the purpose some of the many sketches for *Espace*. When completed in 1954, it was Varèse's first finished ensemble score in more than twenty years.

Could the title have been a nod in response to Henry Miller's lonely encomium that punctuated, and perhaps consoled, Varèse's barren decade? That would be plausible, but Varèse offered an alternative reading of it that resonated with the existentialist mood of the early 1950s. In a program note solicited by Robert Craft to accompany the first recording of the work, Varèse wrote that, for him, the word “deserts” suggests not only “all physical deserts (of sand, sea, snow, of outer space, of empty city streets) but also the deserts in the mind of man; not only those stripped aspects of nature that suggest bareness, aloofness, timelessness, but also that remote *inner* space no telescope can reach, where man is alone, a world of mystery and essential loneliness.”<sup>48</sup>

Work proceeded on separate but parallel tracks. First the instrumental parts were composed (and there is a note in the score to the effect that they can be played without interruption in the absence of the taped insertions), but always with the prerecorded sounds in mind. The actual shaping into “organized sound” of the raw sonic material Varèse had recorded and stored came afterward. In January 1954 Pierre Schaeffer invited Varèse to his studio for musique concrète at the Radiodiffusion française in Paris to finish the job. Arriving in October, he recorded some supplementary sounds on oscillators, rapidly twisting the dials to get the radical curves he had always loved, but now extending over a previously unimaginable (or if imaginable, then surely unachievable) frequency range.

*Déserts* received its first performance in December at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées (the site, four decades earlier, of the stormy premiere of *The Rite of Spring*). It was conducted by Hermann Scherchen (1891–1966), a new-music specialist of long standing, who like Varèse had been in his youth a disciple of Busoni. Old-fashioned modernists greeted futurism's return with typically sadomasochistic delight. “The work roughs us up, in fact, annihilates us,” wrote one. “We have no power over it; it is the work that takes possession of us, crushes us with blows of its terrible fist.”<sup>49</sup> The performance was introduced by Pierre Boulez, who paraphrased for the audience a lecture Varèse had given in 1936, in which he had compared his music to opposing planes and volumes in a perpetual dynamic of mutual attraction and repulsion. The advent of electronics, Varèse announced through Boulez, had liberated his music from analogy. Whereas the composer had always striven indirectly to represent movement in space by the use of percussive rhythm, dynamics, and pitch contours, he could now do so directly thanks to the stereophonic deployment of organized sound through speakers.

The instrumental sections of *Déserts* are remarkably like Varèse's ensemble works of the 1920s; it is as if there had never been any break in his creative output, let alone one that had lasted decades. As in his earlier compositions, the instrumental music's shape is determined by the opposition of pitched material, built up into huge, static, often symmetrical “immovable objects” (as in Ex. 4-4) and the “irresistible force” of unpitched percussion. The freely sliding pitch in the taped interpolations exposes the extent to which (just as Busoni had insisted a half century before) the monolithic system of *douze sons* is a prison, and the long, slowly changing sounds that electronics easily produces makes a similar point about time-honored conceptions of rhythm as pulse. It is only in the taped sections that the immovable objects and the irresistible forces can be reconciled and achieve integration. Perhaps that is why audiences found the work—and especially the interpolations of “organized sound”—so moving, and, at a time when the electronic medium was giving renewed impetus to the dehumanization of art, so human.

mm. 1–15 (percussion omitted)

7 semitones

Two climactic chords

m. 117  $ff$  m9

m. 158  $pp$  m9

$A_4$   $P_5$   $d_5$   $C\sharp$ ,  $B\flat$  missing

$d_{12}$   $M_3$   $M_6$   $M_6$   $M_3$   $d_{12}$   $C\sharp$ ,  $B\flat$ ,  $A\flat$ ,  $B$  missing

ex. 4-4 Opening up of symmetrical pitch space in Edgard Varèse's *Déserts*

In 1960–61, at Vladimir Ussachevsky's invitation, Varèse revised the first and third taped interpolations (the latter now including the prerecorded sound of an organ) at the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center with the assistance of the Turkish composer Bülent Arel (1919–90), who was working there on a Rockefeller grant. By then Varèse had completed a work for tape alone, *Poème électronique*, commissioned by the Philips company to be “delivered,” as the architect Marc Treib put it, “from multiple points in space”<sup>50</sup> over an installation of more than four hundred speakers in its famous Le Corbusier–Xenakis pavilion at the Brussels World's Fair in 1958. The effect of these “four hundred acoustical mouths completely surrounding the five hundred visitors”<sup>51</sup> (in Le Corbusier's happy words) was by all accounts a technological marvel, overwhelming even those it offended.

The music was routed through “sound paths” determined by a mixing console that had the capacity to deploy as many as 180 audio and visual signals through telephone relays to the loudspeakers, film projectors, and multicolored light installations. Heard (and seen) by nearly two million visitors over the six-month course of the Fair, and issued more than once thereafter on commercial recordings, Varèse's eight-minute *Poème* is probably still the most widely disseminated all-electronic composition in the short history of the medium. The charge from Philips was to create “effects of sound in space, therefore of movement, of direction, of reverberation and echoes, which until now have never been used in electronic installations.” The company was of course primarily interested in showing off its reproductive equipment and was at first dubious about entrusting the task to a composer of the avant-garde; Le Corbusier had to insist with threats. But the idea perfectly suited Varèse's long-standing musical ideas, as did the neoprimitivist visual display that Le Corbusier devised to accompany the organized sound.



**fig. 4-7 a** Varèse's *Poème électronique* in its original performance space in the Philips pavilion at the Brussels World's Fair, 1958.

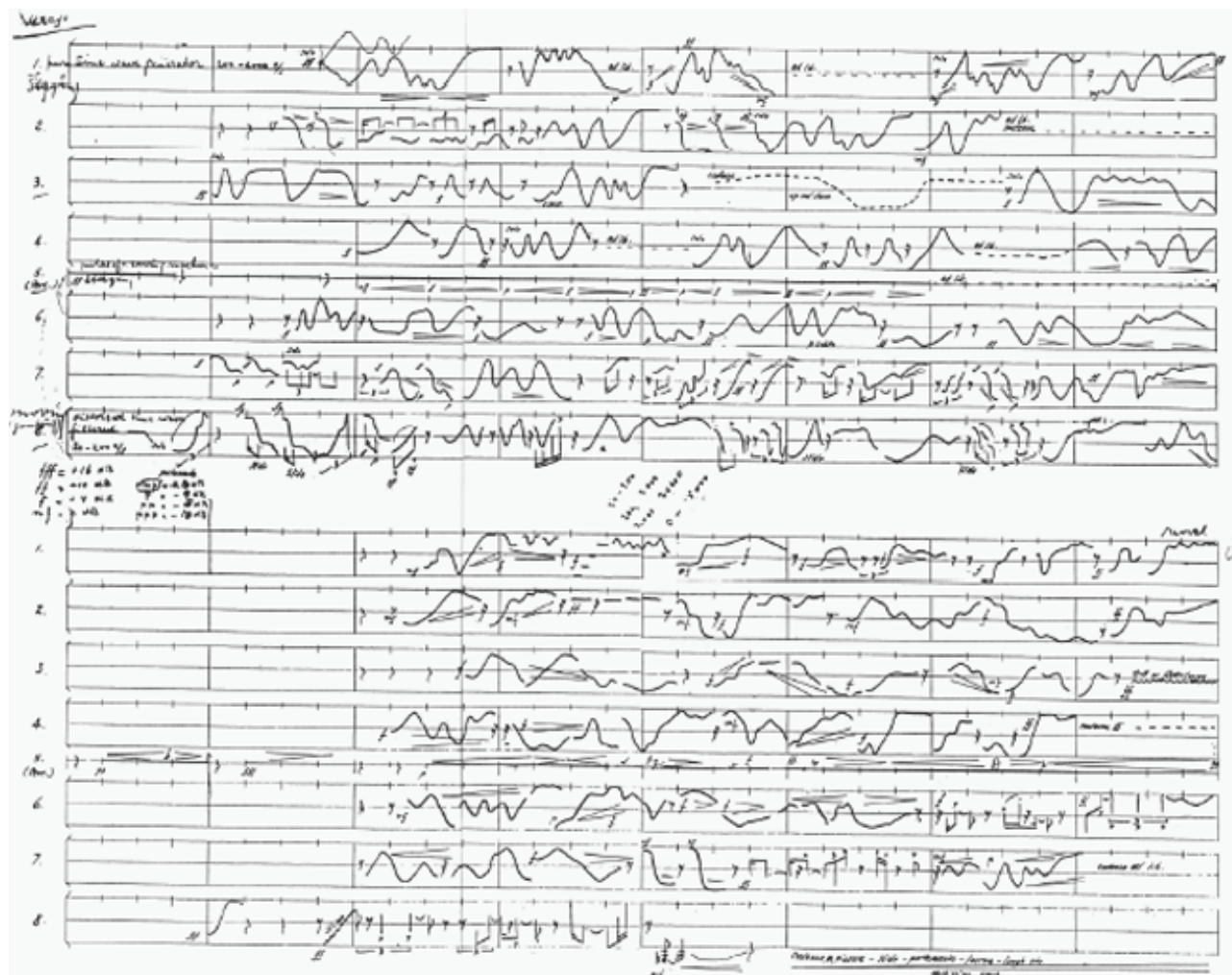


fig. 4-7b Varèse's sketch for *Poème électronique*.

Varèse came to the Philips laboratories in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, in the fall of 1957. He brought over some sound materials unused in *Déserts*, and relied further both on the company's own library of recorded sounds (including its extensive commercial line of classical recordings) and on its sound-synthesizing apparatus. The deliberate result was a (for the time) uniquely eclectic conglomeration of ingredients: "Studio recordings were used, machine noises, transposed piano chords and bells, filtered recordings of choruses and soloists," as the composer enumerated them in retrospect. In addition, "oscillators were used to record sinusoidal sounds [i.e., "sine waves"], and literally unheard of sounds were made by mixing and combining all these." In 1959, looking back on the work, which had confused and antagonized the corporate executives who had commissioned it, Varèse saw the *Poème électronique* as the high point of his career, the single consummate realization of his musical aims. "For the first time I heard my music literally projected into space,"<sup>52</sup> he recalled. It was to be the last as well. Unfortunately, that spatial projection is the one aspect of the work that, since the scrapping of the pavilion at the end of the Fair, can no longer be experienced except as it finds pale reflection in the two channels of domestic stereo reproduction.

*Poème électronique* follows a trajectory analogous to that of *Ionisation*, from lesser to greater determinacy. In the earlier piece that trajectory was realized in the transition from nonpitched to pitched percussion sound. In *Poème électronique*, once past the initial bell sounds (a Dutch and Belgian specialty, perhaps a tribute to the locale in which the piece was created and performed), the transition is from abstract "studio" sounds to sounds associated with human agency, whether produced by voice (in solo and in chorus), by hands holding

drumsticks, or by fingers at the keyboard. The first vocal apparition—a female voice moaning “Oo-gah!”—is a near quote from the Mayan text of *Ecuatorial*, Varèse's earlier neoprimitivist masterpiece, and brings his career full circle. It accompanied the projected images of African tribal costumes and coiffures, drawn by Le Corbusier from his pictorial anthology *L'art décoratif d'aujourd'hui* (“The decorative art of today,” 1925). The up-to-the-minute technology notwithstanding, this was a very old-fashioned modernism for the date. Its “futurism,” in an age of actual space-exploration, was retrospective, even nostalgic (Fig. 4-7).

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## Notes:

(46) Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Dialogues* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), p. 109.

(47) Gunther Schuller, “Conversation with Varèse,” *Perspectives on American Composers*, pp. 38–39.

(48) Edgar Varèse, liner note to *The Music of Edgar Varèse, Vol. 2* (Columbia Master-works ML 57 62, 1960).

(49) Jean Roy, *Musique française* (1962); quoted in Ouellette, *Edgard Varèse*, pp. 188–89.

(50) Marc Treib and Richard Felciano, *Space Calculated in Seconds: The Philips Pavilion, Le Corbusier, Edgard Varèse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 11.

(51) Jean Petit, *Le Poème électronique Le Corbusier* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1958), p. 25.

(52) Quoted in Ouellette, *Varèse*, p. 200.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

See also from Grove Music Online

Serialism

Mario Davidovsky

## BIG QUESTIONS REOPENED

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 4 The Third Revolution

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

As will become increasingly clear as this book nears its end and the narrative approaches the present, the truly revolutionary aspect of electronic music was the new relationship it made possible between composers and works. The composer of an electronic composition can produce a “score” exactly the way a painter produces a picture or a sculptor produces a statue: what is produced is a unique original “art object” rather than a set of directions for performance. And therefore, obviously, “score” is the wrong word for it, since a score is something written, and electronic music can dispense with writing. It created the possibility of a postliterate musical culture. It spelled, potentially, the beginning of the end of the culture of which this book is a history.

But then, the literate tradition of music has never entirely supplanted the preliterate tradition, and there is no reason to expect that the postliterate will ever entirely supplant the literate. There will always be a social use for live musical performances of many kinds, and some of these will go on being literate, at least as long as anyone can foresee. The end of the literate tradition will require the end of all its social uses, and of all social relations based on literacy. Such a society is beyond present imagining.

The social question is fundamental, as the history of electronic music itself has demonstrated. One of the medium's prime attractions, for some composers, was its promise of “asociality,” the unexpectedly literal realization, in all its logical consequences, of the utopian individualism that was modernism's chief inheritance from romanticism. To put Milton Babbitt's celebration of the absolute control he could now exercise over the electronic medium side by side with his earlier call (in “Who Cares If You Listen?” quoted in chapter 3) for “total, resolute, and voluntary withdrawal from [the] public world” so as to secure “complete elimination of the public and social aspects of musical composition” is to see how fundamentally social the issues involving this (or any) kind of music inevitably remain, no matter how tall the ivory tower, or thick its walls.

That is one paradox. Recalling the point made at the end of chapter 3, that American academic serialism was the most perfectly and exclusively literate of all musical repertoires, will uncover an even more fundamental one. The means that Babbitt chose for protecting his purely literate domain from social mediation—namely, the electronic elimination of the performing “middle man”—was precisely the means through which the need for literacy might be transcended. You could not ask for a better illustration of the law of unintended consequences, or of “dialectics,” the tendency of extreme positions to engender their opposites or negations.

As Varèse already noted, Babbitt had no intention of giving up scores, since the score was the only place where the integrity of his compositions could be demonstrated. And yet not even Babbitt could bring himself to give up public performance of his compositions, even the electronic ones. Not even he could face the complete elimination of the social aspect of music making when, thanks to electronics, that became a practical possibility, even though he had called for precisely that when it was just a utopian dream. The best evidence of his step back from the brink is the existence of *Vision and Prayer* and *Philomel*, compositions that combined the electronic medium with a live performer, indeed a spectacular virtuoso, a diva.

From the very beginning, in fact, the contradiction between the potentially asocial electronic medium and the eminently social convention of the public concert was perceived as a problem to be solved. Audiences, assembled in a darkened hall, all facing an empty stage, felt imprisoned. Putting a pair of speakers on the stage provided a focus for the audience's gaze, but made them feel silly. And then there was the problem of knowing when to applaud. It could be solved by raising the house lights (analogous to raising the piano lid at the end of Cage's 4'33"), and Luciano Berio experimented (at least once, in a concert the author attended) by having an actor slowly rise from a chair and take off his jacket over the duration of the performance. (The experiment does not seem to have been repeated; the fact that the author cannot recall what piece it accompanied may suggest the reason.) At other concerts, the audience was invited to walk around as if contemplating sculpture. But despite everything, the discomfort audiences felt was acute—and understandable, as long as no real-time musical performance was taking place. You might as well ask them to come to a concert to listen to the same records they could listen to at home, albeit on superior equipment.

From the beginning, then, there was pressure to integrate electronic music into conventional performance media. We have seen some responses to this pressure even earlier than Babbitt's vocal works, in Varèse's *Déserts* and the concerted pieces for tape and orchestra by Luening and Ussachevsky, in which taped sections alternated with instrumentally performed ones. Yet an earlier example was *Musica su due dimensioni* ("Music in two dimensions"), by Bruno Maderna, composed at the Cologne Radio studio in 1952. This solution, while effective enough in a given instance (and, in the case of *Déserts*, conceptually meaningful), was obviously a makeshift. Alternation of media, even if as skillfully dovetailed as Varèse managed in *Déserts* (the unpitched percussion providing a bridge between the media) was not the same as integration; and the longer it was tolerated, the longer it seemed that a true solution was only being postponed.

The first composer to make a specialty of integrating electronic music into live performances was Mario Davidovsky (b. 1934), an Argentine composer who settled permanently in the United States in 1960, originally as a protégé of Babbitt, with whom he had studied at Tanglewood. At Babbitt's invitation, Davidovsky began working (on a Guggenheim fellowship) at the newly founded Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center. After an initial effort—*Contrastes* for string orchestra and electronic sound (1960)—in a slightly overlapping alternation mode, he began the series of *Synchronisms* on which his reputation is chiefly based.

As the title suggests, these pieces are counterpoints of electronic sounds and virtuoso performances on a wide variety of instruments or (in one case, no. 4, composed in 1967 on the text of the thirteenth Psalm) voices. The challenge, for composer and performer alike, is to match the virtually unlimited electronic sound spectrum by exploiting the extended playing techniques that new-music performers were then pioneering. The conception proved extremely fruitful; as of 1997 Davidovsky's *Synchronisms* numbered eleven in all.

One thing that helped make the series so successful was Davidovsky's refreshingly practical and flexible approach to the technical challenges he had accepted, despite what might otherwise seem the purism of his approach to the medium (admitting only synthesized sounds, never *concrète*). The interaction of the taped and live components is not always precisely calculated. As Stravinsky discovered as early as the 1920s, when he attempted a scoring of his ballet *Svadebka* (or *Les Noces*) accompanied by player pianos, it is virtually impossible to synchronize live music with the absolutely fixed speed of mechanical reproductions; human beings, no matter what their intentions or professed attitudes, have great difficulty "feeling" music that way.

Accordingly, Davidovsky attempted exact coordination only in short passages of intricate counterpoint; elsewhere, in more extended passages in which one component clearly accompanied the other, "an element of chance is introduced," he has written, "to allow for the inevitable time discrepancies that develop between live performers and the constant-speed tape recorder."<sup>53</sup> What Davidovsky, no doubt a bit jestingly, called chance was actually just a bit of leeway in the synchronization of parts. Another potential pitfall was the discrepancy between the equal-tempered tuning of the instruments and the unlimited continuous pitch spectrum available to the composer of electronic music, which Davidovsky did not wish to give up. He resorted to subterfuge. "Use is

of tonal occurrences of very high density—manifested for example by a very high-speed succession of attacks, possible only in the electronic medium. Thus, in such instances—based on high speed and short duration of separate tones, it is impossible for the ear to perceive the pure pitch value of each separate event; though in reacting, it does trace, so to speak, a statistical curve of the density.<sup>54</sup>

In other words, to recall Babbitt's investigations at the synthesizer, the machine is quicker than the ear. A big barrage of tiny, machine-produced pitched sounds can defeat the best-trained ear's powers of discrimination and counter the sense that the tape is out of tune with the instruments. Davidovsky's machine, however, was not the synthesizer. “Classically” trained in the techniques of the early electronic studio, Davidovsky cut and spliced every one of the sounds in his “statistical curve” (and it is a special pleasure to point this out since, unlike Berio, Cage, or Babbitt, Davidovsky has never complained—that is, bragged—about his heroic investment of *Sitzfleisch*).

Davidovsky's *Synchronisms* are often viewed as the electronic counterpart to Berio's *Sequenzas*, virtuoso studies for solo instruments, of which the first, for flute, was composed, for the Italian new-music star Severino Gazzelloni, in 1958. (This famous series eventually numbered fourteen, the last being for cello.) Davidovsky's *Synchronisms No. 1* (Ex. 4-5), completed in 1963, was also composed for flute. It was written for Harvey Sollberger, one of the founding members of Columbia's Group for Contemporary Music. (Most of the *Synchronisms* were written for the members of the group as it evolved; in 1971, *Synchronisms No. 6*, composed for Robert Miller, the Group's pianist, received the Pulitzer Prize.)

*Synchronisms No. 1* requires two performers, since the tape part must be recued, as is especially evident at the end, when it returns, after a lengthy flute solo, to articulate the final cadence. (See the “start/stop” at the end of Ex. 4-5, the last page of the score.) Different performances can thus have differing lengths: Sollberger's own recorded performance lasts 4'15”, while the one recorded by Samuel Baron, an eminent flautist of an older generation, takes only 3'43”. Even electronic music, it seems, can admit “interpretation,” if the composer is willing to allow it.

percussion-like sound

Start slow, accel. po a poco (♩) as fast as possible  
28 sec.

tacet until the Cue 4 finishes.  
PPPP  
45 sec.

Più lento (♩=72) (Freely)

*pp* *ppp* *f* *p* *pp* *ppp*

*pppp* *sf* *pp* *mf* *pp*

*p* *pp* *sf* *sf* *ppp*

*ppp* *sf* *pp* *sf* sub. *pp* *pppp*

*pp* *sf* sub. *pp* *pppp*

START STOP

ex. 4-5 Mario Davidovsky *Synchronisms No. 1*, end

## Notes:

(53) Notes to Composers Recordings CRI SD-204 (1965).

(54) *Ibid.*

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

See also from Grove Music Online

Electronic sound

György Ligeti

## RECIPROcity

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 4 The Third Revolution

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

A less expected form of interaction between live and prerecorded media surfaced around 1960, when a number of composers—many of them, as it happened, of East European nationality—began composing works for conventional instruments that emulated “electronic” sounds. Two aspects of the medium particularly attracted imitators. One was the long, gradually and continuously modified sounds that composers achieved in the studio by using filters and voltage-controlled speed variation, contradicting ordinary assumptions about rhythm and the articulation of musical form.

Since rhythm ordinarily implies the articulation of discrete impulses, music that relied on such endlessly continuous sonorities could seem virtually rhythmless. (A good example is the “King Lear Suite” that Luening and Ussachevsky extracted in 1956 from their incidental music for Orson Welles's production of Shakespeare's play, available on a CRI recording, in which “cold and lonely sounds” that continually change, but without discrete articulations, not only conjure up the wind on the stormy heath, but also “suggest Lear's madness, as he wanders in his fantastic dress of flowers and jingles,”<sup>55</sup> according to the composers' program note.) It offered new answers to that old riddle, how to evoke romantic “timelessness” in a temporal medium.

The other aspect of electronic music that captured the imaginations of composers who were not otherwise drawn to the medium was its use of “frequency bands” of greater or lesser breadth, a phenomenon that occupied a middle ground between the discrete pitches most instruments are constructed to produce and the “unpitched” sounds that some conventional percussion instruments could furnish. Varèse had exploited that middle ground in the taped interpolations in *Déserts*, treating it as a sort of synthesis between the pitched and “unpitched” instrumental sounds of the surrounding sections. He did not try to obtain a similar effect using the instruments themselves.

György Ligeti did try. After *Artikulation* (1958), the electronic piece he synthesized at Stockhausen's studio in Cologne (see chapter 1), he began work on another tape composition, *Atmosphères*, that was to consist entirely of slowly modulating continuous sounds, the meteorological title suggesting that those sounds had a metaphorical resonance for Ligeti similar to the one that it had for Luening and Ussachevsky (whose suite, by the way, was one of the few electronic compositions to have appeared on a commercial recording by the time Ligeti began work on *Atmosphères*).

After spending some time developing the work in the studio, however, Ligeti decided to start over and write *Atmosphères* “for large orchestra without percussion,” as the eventual title page announced. The absence of percussion has been interpreted as polemical, so many works of the 1950s avant-garde having followed Varèse's example by greatly expanding the percussion “section” even in chamber works. But percussion instruments chiefly serve articulative purposes, and the whole point of *Atmosphères* was the banishing of articulations from a music of constant timbral and textural flux—“a music,” as Ligeti described it, “without beginning or end.” (The list of instruments does include a piano, normally a percussion instrument; but it is played by two executants

—“they don't have to be pianists”, the composer notes in the score—one of whom brushes the strings directly and the other holds down the damper pedal; neither touches the keyboard and so the hammers are never activated.)

Even without percussion, the work is scored for a very large orchestra: eighty-eight players on ninety-three instruments (all the flautists doubling on piccolo; one of the clarinetists playing both C and E<sub>b</sub> instruments), each with a separate part, so that by a very strict definition of terms, the work could be described as a gargantuan piece of chamber music. The very beginning of the piece shows why. The opening chord is scored for the entire string section of fifty-six players, each playing a different note but in the closest possible spacing, so as to produce a single huge cluster that covers all the available tempered pitches from the E<sub>b</sub> below the bass staff to C<sub>#</sub> an augmented octave above the soprano high C, equivalent to depressing two-thirds of the piano keyboard simultaneously. (True, Ligeti sacrifices three pitches in the middle to get this registral spread; anybody willing to waste the time it takes to verify the fact will also see that it makes no perceptual difference.) To this eighteen winds add some additional, smaller clusters (and the contrabassoon supplies the lowest note, a semitone below the lowest double bass, so that the cluster covers a full five octaves).

Attacked *pp* and marked *dolcissimo*, the chord sounds not particularly dissonant, but rather like a dull and distant roar. It is the closest equal-tempered approximation available to the electronic studio's white noise, the simultaneous sounding of the whole frequency spectrum. And Ligeti proceeds to modify the chord precisely the way (the only way) that white noise can be processed in the studio, by filtering it. Section by section the instruments drop out *morendo*, dying away by gradual decrescendo to silence, so as to avoid articulating the narrowing of the “bandwidth” until only the cellos and violas are left.

The whole composition is a series of ingenious variations on this basic filtering move, each marked by a rehearsal letter. At B the whole orchestra trumps the first chord with a cluster that adds an octave on either end. It decays at C into a kind of shimmer, in which all the instruments move from sustained tones to oscillations between two tones; but as the full cluster is maintained at all times, the apparent melodic activity produces no discernable change of pitch content. One is reminded of what chemists call Brownian motion, or of Xenakis's statistical “clouds” (see chapter 2)—perhaps another reason why Ligeti chose to call the piece *Atmosphères*.

The single sharp articulation in the piece takes place at G. Having worked a cluster up by degrees into the stratospheric ceiling range of a quartet of piccolos (a sound that, until digital recording was invented, could not be committed to tape or disc without bloodcurdling “intermodulation distortion” that many took as a sly burlesque of the electronic medium), Ligeti could not resist contrasting it with a cluster in the cellar, growled by eight double basses. That is the only place where he gave in to the principle of contrast rather than slow transformation.

The passage between H and J has become famous as an early example of what Ligeti called *Mikropolyphonie*—“micropolyphony,” tiny close-spaced canons that cannot be heard as such because of the pitch saturation, but which guide the composer's hand toward fashioning a typically shimmering texture. At K, the composer contrives a kaleidoscopic array of unison doublings on a single sustained three-note chord encompassing two semitones—what might be termed a “minimal cluster”; then (at L) he gradually broadens the bandwidth by adding semitonal adjacencies on either end.

The return of the full orchestra cluster at N, made even more ethereal by the use of string harmonics, is marked *Tempo primo*—a remark that while perfectly practical (and practicable by the conductor) is nevertheless humorous in the context of a piece that is so wholly without metrical beats, hence devoid of any sense of tempo as the word is normally used. The string harmonics give way to even wispier sonorities at P, as the string players are asked to play with fingers of the left hand only half stopping the strings against the fingerboard so that no focused pitch emerges, just the sound of bow-scrape, and the brass are asked to blow softly without pursing their lips into the usual embouchure, so that only the barely perceptible sound of wind passing through tubes is

heard. After a final passage of natural-harmonic glissandos in the strings (an effect pioneered by Rimsky-Korsakov and made famous by Stravinsky), the accumulated sound is allowed to die away in natural piano resonance over a couple of bars of notated "silence" at the end.

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## Notes:

(55) Notes to Composers Recordings CRI—112.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

See also from Grove Music Online

Electro-acoustic music

Krzysztof Penderecki

## RENAISSANCE OR CO-OPTATION?

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 4 The Third Revolution

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

The laborious exactitude of the notation in *Atmosphères*, and the sheer immensity of the score thus produced, were among its most impressive features. They gave the work the same heroic aura of devoted drudgery—of sacrifice in the name of art—that the tedious “classical” techniques of the tape studio enjoyed. A more direct and radical approach to the project of recreating the sound world of electronic music in live performance was adopted by a group of Polish composers who came to prominence during the “thaw” decade that followed the death of Stalin in the countries of what by then was known as the Soviet Bloc.

That period was marked by considerable social turbulence in the countries that had been “liberated” from fascism by the Red Army, and were now governed by Communist dictatorships underwritten by the threatened return of the Soviet occupying force. The first armed Soviet intervention took place in East Germany in July 1953, to quell a labor uprising in the immediate aftermath of Stalin's demise. A much more serious (because temporarily successful) rising against Communist authority in Hungary was violently put down, as we know, in 1956. During the same year an illegal strike at a metallurgical plant in Poznan, Poland, spread to other cities, and Poland faced the prospect of a similar Soviet invasion. The Communist Party there sought by means of an internal reform and some liberalization of policies to avert that eventuality. In a manner somewhat reminiscent of the measures taken in the Soviet Union itself during World War II, the new leadership (headed by Wladyslaw Gomulka, a Party official who had fallen under suspicion of excessive nationalism in the Stalin years and was briefly imprisoned) sought to recapture the loyalty of the cultural and intellectual élite by relaxing censorship on journalism and the arts.

One of the results was the granting of some administrative autonomy to the Polish Composers Union, including permission to open a window on the West through the so-called Warsaw Autumn Festival, an international showcase for contemporary music. Like most Communist reforms, the Polish liberalization under Gomulka was largely a matter of window-dressing without significant impact on substantive political or social issues. But insofar as the arts were the window, and as long as toleration of modernism was (however cynically) considered a good public-relations investment, Polish composers were allowed some genuine creative freedom.

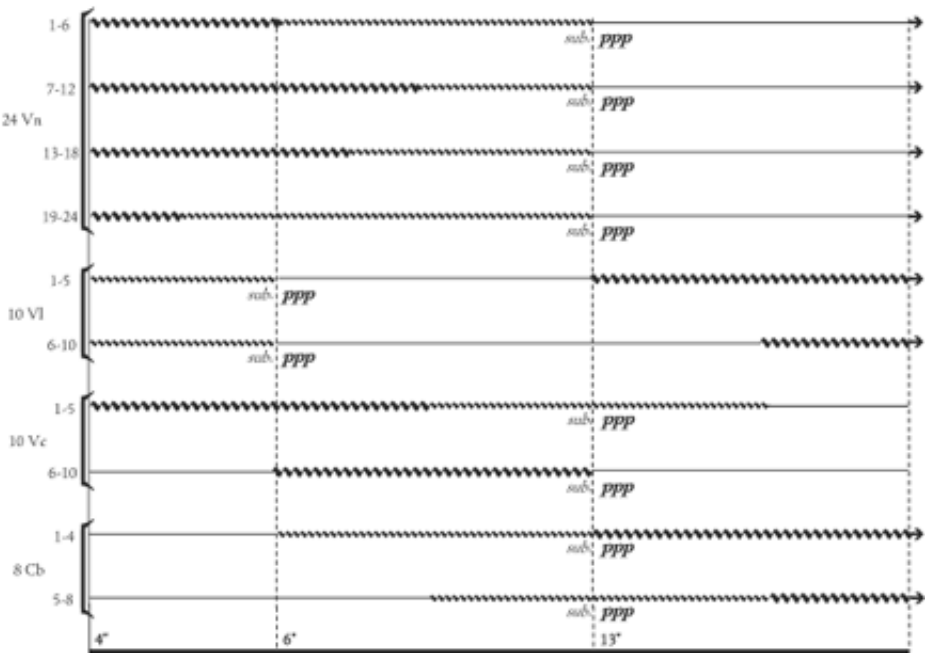
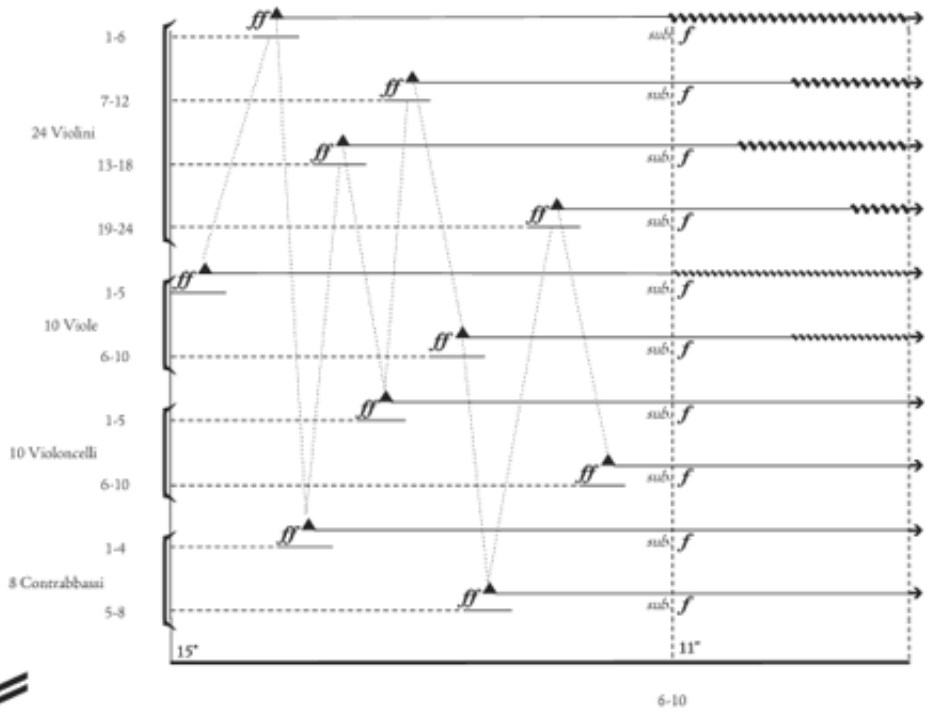
The way they chose to advertise that freedom, of course, was to emulate the Western avant-garde en masse. In retrospect that may seem merely another sort of conformism, imposed from a different quarter and maintained by a different pattern of incentives and risks. But the subjective experience of many composers was buoyant and optimistic, especially insofar as it vouchsafed contact with counterparts in the West while artists everywhere else in the Soviet Bloc remained isolated. The creative ferment thus engendered, known as the “Polish renaissance,” was for a time the wonder of the musical world.

The most forceful impression was made by Krzysztof Penderecki (b. 1933), who announced his presence on the scene in 1959 by winning all three prizes in a competition for young composers sponsored by the Union. The prize money paid for his first trip abroad, where he won the support of Luigi Nono in Italy, Pierre Boulez in Paris,

and—most significantly—Heinrich Strobel, the music programmer of the Southwest German Radio in Baden-Baden and director of the Donaueschingen Festival, Germany's oldest and most prestigious new-music scene, which became Penderecki's principal showcase.

For the Donaueschingen Festival of 1960, Penderecki, who was trained as a violinist, wrote *Anaklasis* (“Light refraction”) for strings and percussion, in which he exploited many unconventional playing techniques on the border between definite and indefinite pitch. It was one of several early Penderecki scores with titles that pertained to sensory qualities, like *Fluorescences* (1962) for orchestra, *Polymorphia* (1961) for strings, and *De natura sonoris* (“Of the nature of sound,” 1966). Full of tone clusters, extreme registers, unusual timbres, they were designated “sonority-pieces” by the composer. Several choral pieces—*Stabat Mater* (1962), *St. Luke Passion* (1963–66)—combined similar “sonorist” techniques with Christian sacred texts, as if to identify one expression of cultural nonconformism, within the context of Communist rule, with another.

Far and away the best known of these compositions, indeed the most famous representative of the whole Warsaw Autumn phenomenon, was the piece for fifty-two solo strings that Penderecki published in 1961 as *Tren ofiarom Hiroszimy* (“Threnody for the victims of Hiroshima”). In conception and effect it is very similar to Ligeti's *Atmosphères*, but its notation is very different. The same long-held, gradually changing tones that Ligeti wrote with conventional note values and very slow metronome settings are notated here simply in terms of their durations in seconds, as measured across the page from left to right. And instead of fixing every pitch in the conventional way, thus building up his clusters by discrete semitones, Penderecki realized (as a string player would) that there was an easier way to obtain indeterminate “frequency bands.” The range of a string instrument does not have a precisely determined upper limit. Therefore, to ask a group of violinists to play “the highest note on the instrument” is to guarantee a cluster.



⑥

1-6  
24 Va  
7-12  
13-18  
19-24  
mf

1-5  
10 VI  
6-10  
pizz. l. bar arco  
arco  
l. bar pizz. arco  
arco  
l. bar arco pizz.  
arco  
pizz. arco l. bar arco  
arco

10 Vc  
pizz. arco l. bar arco  
arco  
l. bar arco pizz.  
arco  
l. bar pizz. arco  
arco  
pizz. l. bar arco  
arco

1-4  
8 Cb  
6-10  
mf

15'

ex. 4-6 Krzysztof Penderecki, *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima*, beginning

On the first page of the *Threnody* score (Ex. 4-6), all the instruments are asked to take their “highest notes”; the result is a truly memorable stridency, a veritable scream, fitting indeed for a piece with such a horrific subtext. Other sound material in the piece is generated by rapid alternations of indefinitely high pizzicati with sounds made by bowing below the bridge, bowing right on top of the bridge, even bowing on the tailgut, striking the string with the wood of the bow, knocking on the belly of the instrument (as in Xenakis's *Pithoprakta*), as well as the more ordinary gamut of *ponticello*, *col legno*, and *sul tasto* effects. One English reviewer noted dryly that Penderecki asked his players to “do everything possible on their instruments short of actually playing them.”<sup>5 6</sup>

For each of these stunt effects Penderecki devised a notational symbol, which (before the advent of computer typesetting) had actually to be cast in type by the publisher. Sometimes these symbols succeed one another in

groups that are subjected to retrogrades and canons; but again, as in the case of *Atmosphères*, these canons and retrogrades are not really thematic. They are just means of generating complex textures by using an ad hoc algorithm. The effect of widening and narrowing pitch bands is notated graphically for the benefit of the conductor's or analyst's conceptualization of the effect; in the parts, notation by normal chromatic pitch notation (sometimes augmented by special signs for quarter tones) is necessary, since unlike the opening high clusters, these have to be precisely calculated.

*Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima* was a very difficult and expensive score to print. The fact that the Polish State Publishing House for Music was willing to make the considerable outlay seems related to the similar expensive promotions accorded avant-garde works by Stockhausen and, especially, Ligeti in Western Europe. In both cases, to showcase the avant-garde was to display a commitment to creative freedom, of propaganda benefit in the cold war. But in Penderecki's case, unlike the others, there was a more overtly political component as well. Calling attention to the United States Army's deadly attack on Japanese civilians, the most destructive single military act in history, was of propagandistic benefit to the Soviet Bloc, the Hiroshima bombing often being cited as a symbol of the American militarism, not to say savagery, that contributed to the breakup of the old wartime alliance against fascism. It made the performance of Penderecki's avant-garde music in Poland a politically correct exercise. That was an adroit feat of cultural politics in itself.

In later years, Penderecki let it be known that the piece published as the *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima* was first performed under the decidedly neutral, vaguely Cageian title *8" 37"*, and had been rejected by the publishing house as too expensive a prospect for printing. He gave it (he said) the politically fraught title *ex post facto*, at the suggestion of the director of the Polish Radio, so as to make it an attractive commodity for promotion by the Communist government—at first in Paris, where it was officially entered in a prize competition under the auspices of UNESCO.<sup>57</sup> The story is plausible, if only because once past the opening “screams” there is nothing in the piece of a comparably pictorial or suggestive character. The screams are screams, it would appear, only because they have been so labeled.

Does this make the composer out to be a cynic? A careerist? Or just someone who knew how to outsmart a formidable and often oppressive state bureaucracy, and thereby score a symbolic victory over authority and oppression (and who might well, like countless others, have sincerely deplored the bombing of Hiroshima)? And was the bureaucracy even outsmarted? Did it not also score a symbolic victory? Co-optation was a game played on both sides of the cold war, in any case; it is a game played on all sides of all fences. Ligeti benefited from it too, in 1968, when Stanley Kubrick exploited *Atmosphères* as, well, atmosphere in the soundtrack for his futuristic fantasy *2001*, and reaped for the composer a gold mine of publicity and name-exposure if not royalty payments from the marketing of record albums (out of which Ligeti has complained of being cheated) such as no avant-gardist had ever dreamt of.

What both of these stories prove, if nothing else, is that not even the avant-garde, which by virtual definition (or by defined purpose) resists commercial or ideological exploitation, has been able to resist it as the twentieth century, that most commercial and ideological of centuries, ran its course.

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## Notes:

(56) Frank Howes, *The Times*; quoted in Bernard Jacobson, *A Polish Renaissance* (London: Phaidon, 1960), p. 147.

(57) Ludwik Erhardt, *Spotkania z Krzysztofem Pendereckim* (Warsaw: Polskie Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1975), Wolfram Schwinger, *Penderecki: Begegnungen, Lebensdaten, Werkkommentäre* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstadt, 1979). My thanks to Tim Rutherford-Johnson for the references.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

## CHAPTER 5 Standoff (I)

### Music in Society: Britten

Chapter: CHAPTER 5 Standoff (I)

Source: MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

## HISTORY OR SOCIETY?

*Art remains outside the line of human conduct, with an end, rules, and values which are not those of the man but of the work to be produced. Hence the despotic and all-absorbing power of art, as also its astonishing power of soothing: it frees from every human care, it establishes the artifex, artist or artisan, in a world apart, cloistered, defined, and absolute, in which to devote all the strength and intelligence of his manhood to the service of the thing which he is making.<sup>1</sup>*

—Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* (1920)

*A relationship of opposites had come into being; art had become a critical mirror, showing the irreconcilable nature of the aesthetic and the social worlds.<sup>2</sup>*

—Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity—An Incomplete Project” (1981)

*Art is neither a mirror nor a substitute for the world. It is an addition to that universal reality which contains natural man and shows the infinite varieties of ways that man can be.<sup>3</sup>*

—George Rochberg, *Reflections on the Renewal of Music* (1972)

*Scientists are infatuated with the idea of revolution.<sup>4</sup>*

—Richard Lewontin, *Darwin's Revolution* (1983)

Before plunging into the home stretch of the “relative present,” the historically undistanced recent past, it is time, in this chapter and the next, for a stocktaking. The essential question of modern art, as it was understood by modern artists during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, and the essential debate, was whether artists lived in history or in society. Posed literalistically, of course, the question is absurd. Everybody, artists included, obviously lives in both, and society (like everything else human) is a product of history. But as a metaphor for values and loyalties, the question crystallizes the dilemma of a period in which the values and loyalties of artists had become polarized to the point of crisis. In the minds of many, one served one's art or one's society, and loyalty to the one precluded loyalty to the other. One had to choose.

The choice was baldly and memorably crystallized in the art critic Clement Greenberg's article “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” which appeared in 1939 and may well have been the most influential twentieth-century essay on esthetics and the arts. The title stated categorical alternatives. One could be avant-garde, or one could produce kitsch, mere pseudo-art. There was no middle ground, because “a superior consciousness of history” had led those who created “art and literature of a high order” to form a united faction that had “succeeded in ‘detaching’ itself from society,” and, in so doing, had managed “to find a path along which it would be possible to keep

culture *moving*.”<sup>5</sup>

Important artists, Greenberg contended, “derive their chief inspiration from the medium they work in,” from which it followed that “content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself” and “subject matter or content becomes something to be avoided like a plague.”<sup>6</sup> It was inevitable, therefore, that at the late point in history that was the twentieth century, the best artists should be “artists’ artists,” the best poets “poets’ poets,”<sup>7</sup> and that the truly valid art of the period “has estranged a great many of those who were capable formerly of enjoying and appreciating ambitious art and literature, but who are now unwilling or unable to acquire an initiation into their craft secrets.” That social estrangement, Greenberg strongly implied, was in itself a criterion of artistic validity.

As we know, these questions were sorely aggravated by mid-twentieth-century politics. The one choice, service to society, had been tainted in one part of the world by the ugly demands of totalitarian dictatorships that dealt harshly with dissidents, and in another by the degrading pressures of capitalist commercialism, at which Greenberg had mainly been railing. The other choice, “disinterested” loyalty to the demands of art and to maintaining the historical evolution of its material, had led to a degree of professional specialization that, even as it offered political consolations, threatened institutional isolation and condemned artists to a social irrelevance that, ironically enough, had no historical precedent.

But of course the split was fraught, as real-life dichotomies always tend to be, with irony. Political authorities who demanded social commitment from artists justified their demands (and certainly their repressions) by appealing to the “mandates of history.” Greenberg himself had argued that the “superior consciousness of history” that led the avant-garde into social withdrawal had been in reality “a new kind of criticism of society, an historical criticism.”<sup>8</sup> (Putting things this way allowed Greenberg to believe that his esthetics had a Marxist base.) Within the world of music, moreover, the concepts that drove theorizing on the mandates of history and the autonomous development of style were founded on developments that had taken place mainly within the most public (hence socially oriented) musical genres, opera and symphony.

The ideologies that drove the practice of the arts to its unprecedented twentieth-century crisis had historical precedents, and we are familiar with them. Both opposing tendencies can be traced back to the nineteenth century. In music, the antisocial extreme had its origins in the historicism of the New German School, while its opposite originated in the populism and social activism of Romantic opera. We have seen how both sides claimed legitimizing descent from Beethoven—or rather, from aspects of Beethoven's posthumous reception (the “Beethoven myth”). Later, both sides could also claim descent from Wagner, who like Beethoven qualified both as a technical innovator and as a champion of social issues who broadened the social base of artistic appeal.

Since Wagner's time, however, few if any figures seemed able to combine these roles. In the twentieth century they tended, increasingly, to point in opposite directions. Commitment entailed renunciation. If perpetual technical innovation tended to lessen audience appeal, those committed to it could claim to be making a heroic sacrifice. But by the same token, social commitment placed constraints on technical innovation; that too could be regarded as a sacrifice. The only possible exceptions to the great rift were in the realm of opera, with Berg's *Wozzeck*, as ostentatiously innovative in technique as it was gripping in the theater, furnishing the outstanding example. But it was an isolated example, unlikely to be repeated; for since Berg's time, as we have seen, the place of opera, both as popular culture and as a site of high technology, had been usurped by the movies.

The coming polarization of art music into “social” and “elite” categories had already been sensed by many nineteenth-century musicians. Chaikovsky expressed it vividly in letters to his patron, Mme von Meck. As the product of a conservatory education, he had been schooled to regard “absolute music” as the highest form not only of music, but of all art. “Symphonic and chamber varieties of music,” he wrote accordingly, “stand much higher than the operatic.”<sup>9</sup> And yet he persisted in writing operas notwithstanding, and ultimately came to regard himself primarily as an operatic composer. For, as he put it in a passage that was naturally exploited to



the hilt by the Soviet musical establishment, “opera and only opera brings you close to people, allies you with a real public, makes you the property not merely of separate little circles but—with luck—of the whole nation.”<sup>10</sup>

“To restrain oneself from writing operas is a form of heroism,” Chaikovsky went so far as to assert. And, he continued, “in our time there is such a hero,” namely Brahms, a composer Chaikovsky otherwise despised. For this reason, if for no other,

Brahms is worthy of respect and admiration. Unfortunately, his creative gift is meager and does not measure up to the scope of his aspirations. Nevertheless, he is a hero. I lack that heroism, and the stage, with all its tawdriness, attracts me in spite of everything.<sup>11</sup>

Of course Chaikovsky's tongue was in his cheek when he wrote that; but his irony was effective precisely because it pretended agreement with a widespread opinion even as it gave real assent to the opposite view (just as widely held). These were the positions that became ever more hardened and antagonistic as the twentieth century approached and passed its ideologically fraught middle, to the point where Pierre Boulez could actually call (heroically? terroristically? literally? tongue in cheek?) for the destruction of the world's opera houses, so that the mandates of music history might sooner be fulfilled without the irrelevant competing claims of society.<sup>12</sup>

We can best take the measure of that crux by focusing on two outstanding composers whose careers are often viewed as antithetical. They were, in a sense, stand-ins for Chaikovsky and Brahms, as Chaikovsky framed the split. Both were hailed as heroes by their admirers, and perhaps overpraised at times; and both were dismissed as superfluous by their detractors. Each embraced one side of the century's esthetic dichotomy with an extremity that turned them into symbols. Their followings tended to be mutually exclusive, further intensifying the split that defined musical life in the century's “middle third.”

But neither was institutionally constrained to espouse the position that he came to symbolize. Both lived in countries whose governments adopted a laissez-faire policy toward the arts, and neither was permanently affiliated with the academy. Thus the commitment of the one to social utility could not be attributed (as, for example, Shostakovich's often was) to totalitarian pressure; and the commitment of the other to the posing and solving of technical problems and to maximum complexity of utterance could not be attributed (as Babbitt's often was) to academic careerism.

Benjamin Britten (1913–76) was a specialist in opera. He was the only major composer who could be called that in the mid-to-late twentieth century, and he knew it; he even described himself to his friend and fellow composer Michael Tippett (1905–98) as “possibly an anachronism”<sup>13</sup> for that reason. (The midcentury avant-garde would have of course agreed.) But he was uniquely successful in his chosen domain—so successful that it was arguably Britten's example that kept the genre viable through the leanest years of its existence, and prevented its lapsing into an exclusively “museum” status.

Just as Chaikovsky in a sense foretold, the accomplishment made Britten the musical darling (as well as the homonym) of his nation, Britain, which had not produced a composer of comparable international standing—and surely none of comparable achievement in opera—since the seventeenth century. He sought and achieved unprecedented social recognition. He was given the honor of a royal commission for an opera to celebrate the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953, and near the end of his life was elevated beyond knighthood to a “life peerage” or noble title, becoming Lord Britten of Aldeburgh. Britten always explicitly avowed that his commitment to opera stemmed (again echoing Chaikovsky) from a larger view of his calling as public service. He further sought, just as explicitly, to reconcile that calling with a fully modern, if eclectic, musical manner, which (in a sense belying his reputation as a “national” figure) drew extensively on nearly the full range of contemporary European styles, as well as on a number of Asian musics. We shall have a chance, in this chapter, to compare his preaching with his practice on all fronts.

The American composer Elliott Carter (b. 1908), by extreme contrast, spent most of his career as heroically spurning the stage as had Brahms. Only as he neared the age of ninety did he (perhaps emulating the aged Verdi) unexpectedly begin work on an opera, *What's Next?*, a one-act comedy (first performed in 1999) that did not so much involve adapting his musical practice to a new medium as it did contriving a stage action that allegorized (possibly even genially satirizing) that musical practice, famous for its daunting intricacy. It was an anomaly among his works, a jeu d'esprit or witticism, and was frankly presented and received as such.

Carter's chief medium was abstractly titled instrumental music; the string quartet was as central to his output as opera was to Britten's (although Britten did write three quartets). His favored approach was reminiscent of the formal ideals of New Criticism: the expression of an underlying unity through an extreme surface diversity—maximum complexity under maximum control. He strenuously opposed stylistic eclecticism, and deliberately rejected a national (or “Americanist”) creative identity in favor of a “universal” (that is, generically Eurocentric) one. As with Britten, we have Carter's own testimony on the social implications of his conscious career choices and his stylistic trajectory, and we will explore them in the next chapter.

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## Notes:

- (1) Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism* (1920), trans. J. F. Scanlan (New York: Scribners, 1930), Chap. III (“Making and Doing”).
- (2) Jürgen Habermas, “Modernity: An Incomplete Project,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983), p. 10.
- (3) George Rochberg, “Reflections on the Renewal of Music” (1972), in Rochberg, *The Aesthetics of Survival: A Composer's View of Twentieth-Century Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), p. 235.
- (4) Richard Lewontin, “Darwin's Revolution,” *New York Review of Books* XXX, no. 10 (16 June 1983).
- (5) Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939), in Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 7–8.
- (6) *Ibid.* pp. 8–9.
- (7) *Ibid.* p. 10.
- (8) *Ibid.* p. 7.
- (9) P. I. Chaikovsky to N. F. von Meck (1879); A. A. Orlova, ed., *Chaikovskiy o muzike, o zhizni, o sebe* (Leningrad: Muzika, 1976), p. 117.
- (10) Chaikovsky to von Meck, 27 September 1885; Chaikovsky, *Polnoye sobraniye sochineniy: Literaturniye proizvedeniya i perepiska*, Vol. XIII (Moscow: Muzika, 1971), p. 159.
- (11) Chaikovsky to von Meck, 11 October 1885; *Ibid.* p. 171.
- (12) Jan Buzga, “Interview mit Pierre Boulez in Prag,” *Melos* XXXIV (1967): 162.
- (13) Humphrey Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* (New York: Scribners, 1992), p. 193.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Opera: The 20th century

Benjamin Britten

Gian Carlo Menotti

## SOME FACTS AND FIGURES

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 5 Standoff (I)

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

Between 1941 and 1973, Britten produced a total of seventeen works for the lyric stage. He established his reputation right after the war with *Peter Grimes* (op. 33), an opera set in Aldeburgh, an English fishing village near the composer's own home. It was first performed on 7 June 1945 by the Sadler's Wells company (now the English National Opera), London's smaller, less prestigious operatic stage, and almost immediately went around the world in a manner reminiscent of the operatic hits of the 1920s. Within three years it had played at London's Royal Opera House at Covent Garden, New York's Metropolitan, Milan's La Scala, and sixteen other locations in France, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Denmark, Sweden, Austria, Switzerland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and the United States.

His time freed by *Peter Grimes's* commercial success, Britten began turning out operas on an almost yearly basis. His next major hit, six years and five operas later, was *Billy Budd* (op. 50), after Herman Melville's shipboard story. In 1953 came *Gloriana* (op. 53), the coronation commission, a historical opera about Elizabeth I, the new queen's namesake. *The Turn of the Screw*, op. 54 (1954), after Henry James's ghost story, was a chamber opera (the "orchestra" consisting of thirteen solo instruments), a genre calculated for the resources, and for the encouragement, of small touring companies. The original touring company that performed it, the English Opera Group, was founded by Britten himself and his lifelong companion, the tenor Peter Pears. It was an outgrowth of his strong commitment to take his art to the people.

Britten's next opera, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (op. 64) after Shakespeare, came six years later, in 1960. It was first performed at Aldeburgh, a coastal village where Britten and Pears had established a summer festival. In the interim he had written a ballet (*The Prince of the Pagodas*, op. 57) and *Noye's Fludde* (op. 59), a setting of a medieval miracle play for church performance. In the train of the latter came three "parables" or one-act church operas: *Curlew River*, op. 71 (1964), *The Burning Fiery Furnace*, op. 77 (1966), and *The Prodigal Son*, op. 81 (1968). Britten's last two operas were *Owen Wingrave*, op. 85 (1970), composed for television performance, and *Death in Venice*, op. 88 (1973), after the famous novella by Thomas Mann.

None of the later works matched the colossal success of *Peter Grimes*, but at least four—*Billy Budd*, *The Turn of the Screw*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Death in Venice*—have joined *Peter Grimes* in the permanent international repertoire. No composer in the postwar period has come close to matching that record. Two other composers have managed to produce international repertory operas: Stravinsky with *The Rake's Progress* (1951) and Poulenc with *Dialogues of the Carmelites* (1956). Virgil Thomson's *The Mother of Us All* (1947), an opera about Susan B. Anthony, has received many performances in America (partly because of its suitability for conservatory and workshop productions) but has never traveled.

Britten's only possible rival as an opera specialist was Gian Carlo Menotti (1911–2007), an Italian-born composer long resident in the United States, who was even more prolific than Britten in the genre, with twenty-

five operas to his credit by 1993, most of them written to his own librettos. Menotti's was a strangely lopsided career, however, with amazing early successes followed by near oblivion. His first stage piece, an *opera buffa* called *Amelia al ballo* (1936; most often performed in English translation as *Amelia Goes to the Ball*), was so well received that the Metropolitan Opera accepted it for production in 1938. It brought on a steady stream of commissions, many from broadcast media.

The first of Menotti's truly amazing successes was *The Medium* (1945), a melodramatic chamber opera in two acts with a cast of five singers and a mime, and an accompanying orchestra of fourteen pieces. It was first performed in 1946 at Columbia University's Brander Matthews Theater, which a few years earlier had been the site of Britten's first operatic endeavor (an unsuccessful folk opera or operetta called *Paul Bunyan*, to a libretto by the poet W. H. Auden, then like Britten a British immigrant to the United States), and was very likely a precedent or model for Britten's *Turn of the Screw*. Together with a comic curtain raiser called *The Telephone*, *The Medium* was produced on Broadway during the 1947–48 season, and enjoyed a run of 211 performances. Menotti himself directed a Hollywood film adaptation of *The Medium* in 1951, and the United States government sent the double bill on a European tour in 1955.

His next opera, a full-evening “musical drama” in *verismo* style called *The Consul* (1949), was a cold-war saga about the desperate efforts, culminating in suicide, of a would-be emigrant to obtain an exit visa from an unnamed European police state. It, too, had a successful Broadway run, and won both the Drama Critic's Circle Award for the season's best play and the Pulitzer Prize in music in 1950. The next year, Menotti received a commission from NBC television for a Christmas opera, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, a story of the Three Magi and a miraculous healing. Televised annually for a dozen years and frequently performed by amateur groups and workshops, it may well be the most widely seen opera of all time. Menotti's next opera, *The Saint of Bleeker Street* (1954), about an alleged miracle worker in New York's “Little Italy” district, once again played Broadway, receiving Critics' Circle Awards both as best opera and as best play, and another Pulitzer Prize.

These operas, especially *The Medium* and *The Consul*, are still revived in major houses and can be called repertory items, at least in America. But Menotti would never have another major operatic success, though his career lasted another four decades. His last production on a major world stage was *The Last Savage*, a satire of modern life (including twelve-tone music), which failed miserably at the Metropolitan Opera in 1964. His thirteenth opera, a work for children (“and people who like children”) called *Help, Help, the Globolinks!* (1968), about an invasion from outer space (with electronic music to represent the aliens), was the last to be published. His later premieres have been at provincial venues, most frequently the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. *The Wedding* (1988) was introduced in Seoul, Korea. In his later years, Menotti was more active as a stage director and impresario (directing the Festival of Two Worlds at Spoleto, Italy, and Charleston, South Carolina) than as a creative figure. His most recent premieres took place under his own auspices.

The reasons for Menotti's apparent failure to stem the ebbing tide for opera while Britten continued to flourish may have had something to do with musical style and invention. Menotti's scores, reminiscent of Puccini both in their melodic and harmonic idiom and in their formal procedures, stopped attracting critical interest while Britten's, continually surprising, commanded the respect of critics otherwise committed to modernism (which Menotti actively resisted and despised). It may be, too, that measuring Menotti's success by the standards of his early Broadway runs is unfair; no other composer of continuously-sung opera ever duplicated that kind of success, either. Critical success and audience success are by no means dependably in alignment.

But the ephemeral success of the one composer and the continually burgeoning success of the other (*Billy Budd*, for example, becoming a repertoire opera only after an initial flop that led to revisions, like some famous works of Verdi and Puccini), suggests that Menotti's works, while explosively effective on first exposure, exhausted their meaning quickly, while Britten's embodied latent meanings that revealed themselves (or that emerged into the light of critical discourse) only over time, engaging performers, audiences, and critics in continual dialogue. That is what makes for a long cultural shelf life, the kind that characterizes and constitutes “classics.”

It is that process of emergence that will occupy our attention here, for that is where Britten's historical significance seems to lie. Only in this way can we hope to explain Britten's by now universally recognized stature as a major definer of the contemporary music of his day, and his endurance, despite his refusal to embrace the narrowly stylistic definition of musical contemporaneity that reigned in avant-garde circles at midcentury.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Benjamin Britten

Peter Pears

## A MODERN HERO

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 5 Standoff (I)

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

Britten had to overcome considerable odds to realize his potential as a musical dramatist. The breakdown of the opera house as an institution coincided with the onset of the worldwide economic depression of the 1930s, just when Britten was finding his feet as a composer. There was no longer the possibility of an apprenticeship within the institutional structure of the musical theater. Britten, who had resolved to earn his living as a professional composer rather than a teacher, was forced, ironically enough, into the movie industry—the very force that most starkly threatened the continued viability of the lyric stage.

Like Virgil Thomson in America at roughly the same time, Britten earned his living from 1935 to 1937 providing soundtrack scores for government-sponsored documentaries. Work on films like *Coal Face*, on harsh labor conditions in the mining industry (some of the music consisting of recorded collages of simulated industrial sounds anticipating *musique concrète*), or *Peace of Britain*, about the burdens of defense spending on the national economy, increased Britten's sense of solidarity with leftist and pacifist opinion. Both viewpoints were strong in England, as well as America, during the depression decade, which was also the decade of Fascist victories in Germany and Spain that presaged the inevitable coming of World War II.

In 1936 Britten wrote incidental music for *Stay Down Miner*, a play by the Communist writer Montagu Slater (1902–56), produced by the Left Theatre, which took a much more militant line about the labor situation than *Coal Face*. The next year, he composed a *Pacifist March* for an equally militant organization called the Peace Pledge Union. He also wrote music for plays by W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood for production by the Group Theatre, yet another of the militant political associations of artists that mushroomed during what Auden later called “the low, dishonest decade”<sup>14</sup> of the thirties.

In 1939, together with Peter Pears, Britten followed Auden and Isherwood in the wave of leftists and pacifists who emigrated from England to North America as war clouds gathered. After a short stay in Canada, Britten and Pears settled for a while in the environs of New York, where they met and befriended Aaron Copland. Having already collaborated with Auden on a number of projects in England, Britten continued the creative association with *Paul Bunyan*, the largest work of his American sojourn. He wrote some important instrumental works in America as well, including a Violin Concerto and a *Sinfonia da Requiem* in memory of his parents.

Auden and Isherwood remained expatriates for the rest of their lives, but Britten and Pears—not without apprehension at the fate that might await them as conscientious objectors—returned to England in 1942, at the height of hostilities. The decision had been made the previous summer. Britten and Pears had gone to southern California for the purpose of reentering the United States from Mexico and thereby qualifying for permanent immigrant status. While there Britten came across an article by the English writer E. M. Forster about George Crabbe (1754–1832), an English poet best known for his grimly realistic depictions of rustic life in the southeastern coastal district of Suffolk, from which he hailed.

Britten, a Suffolk man himself, was seized with homesickness and conceived the idea that he could only fulfill his musical potential in his aboriginal surroundings, in the bosom of (and in service to) his native society. The conviction was abetted when, pursuing Forster's lead, Pears bought an old edition of Crabbe, where he and Britten found a long narrative poem called *The Borough* (1810), describing life in Aldeburgh, the very town where Britten had purchased a home shortly before emigrating. They immediately began planning the scenario for an opera on its basis.

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fig. 5-1 Benjamin Britten (at the piano) and Peter Pears; photo by Lotte Jacobi, 1939.

Early in 1942, while Pears and Britten were awaiting the opportunity (infrequent in wartime) to book boat passage back to England, Serge Koussevitzky, acting on Copland's recommendation, performed the *Sinfonia da Requiem* with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Impressed with its dramatic qualities, he asked Britten why he had never written an opera. Preferring not to mention *Paul Bunyan*, Britten (as he put it in the Introduction to the vocal score of *Peter Grimes*) "explained that the construction of a scenario, discussions with a librettist,



planning the musical architecture, composing preliminary sketches, and writing nearly a thousand pages of orchestral score, demanded a freedom from other work which was an economic impossibility for most young composers.”<sup>15</sup>

Later that same year, Koussevitzky's wife Natalie died. She had inherited a tea fortune that had already financed her husband's prewar publishing firm (*Éditions Russes de Musique*). Now, as a memorial to her, the conductor established the Koussevitzky Music Foundation for the commissioning of major works by composers of all nationalities. Britten was informed that he was to be the first recipient of a Koussevitzky Foundation grant of a thousand dollars. (The next was Bartók, for his *Concerto for Orchestra*.) That is how *Peter Grimes* became a reality, and also why Britten's exceptionally prolific career as a composer for the stage only got off the ground in his fourth decade, with his op. 33.

Peter Grimes, the character from *The Borough* that Britten and Pears chose for their protagonist, had already been singled out by Forster, in his article on Crabbe, as an item of special interest: “a savage fisherman who murdered his apprentices and was haunted by their ghosts.”<sup>16</sup> When they read his story in full, Britten and his collaborator found that Grimes, sadist though he was, was not an unmitigated villain. Crabbe had used him, in a fashion more typical of realist writers than romantics, to expose social injustice. “No success could please his cruel soul,” the poet wrote of his fisherman,

- He wish'd for one to trouble and control;
- He wanted some obedient boy to stand
- And bear the blow of his
- outrageous hand;
- And hoped to find in some
- propitious hour
- A feeling creature subject to his power.

He found the opportunity to indulge his cruelty with impunity thanks to the English workhouse system, which supplied him with indigent orphan boys, utterly without civil rights, whom he could exploit for his own purposes be they legitimate or otherwise. As the Britten scholar Philip Brett has noted, “unlike the typical villain of the Gothic novel, Grimes does not have to resort to kidnapping to place another person under his complete control; he has only to apply to the nearest workhouse.”<sup>17</sup> But this implicates society in the crime, as Crabbe makes clear:

- Some few in town observed in Peter's trap
- A boy, with jacket blue and woollen cap;
- But none inquired how Peter used the rope,
- Or what the bruise, that made the stripling stoop;
- None could the ridges on his back behold,
- None sought him shiv'ring in the winter's cold;
- None put the question—“Peter, doest thou give
- “The boy his food?—What, man! the lad must live;
- “Consider, Peter, let the child have bread,
- “He'll serve thee better if he's stroked and fed.”
- None reason'd thus—and some, on hearing cries,
- Said calmly, “Grimes is at his exercise.”

But after his third apprentice mysteriously dies, the town does ostracize the fisherman, who now must fish alone, and does so where no one else will go:

- There anchoring, Peter chose from man to hide,
- There hang his head, and view the lazy tide
- In its hot, slimy channel slowly glide.

Thus Crabbe exposes a double injustice: Grimes's cruel exploitation of his helpless apprentices, and the townspeople's hypocritical disapproval of behavior in which they have all been complicit. The plight of the criminal fisherman who even so is banished unjustly was a theme of attractive complexity to modern artists like Britten and Pears, who were heirs to an even more relativistic notion of responsibility and blame, an even more exacting sense of social justice, and an even more compelling interest in psychological complexities than the prophetic Crabbe. Grimes was, or could be if suitably fleshed out, a character to set beside the similarly prophetic Büchner's *Wozzeck*, the delinquent yet pitiable antihero of Berg's famous opera, which had made so strong an impression on Britten that he had once nurtured the hope of studying with Berg (to the dismay of his official teachers at London's Royal College of Music). Indeed, *Wozzeck* would be a model for *Peter Grimes* in ways that went far beyond the general similarity of their protagonists.

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## Notes:

(14) W. H. Auden, "September 1, 1939."

(15) Quoted in Philip Brett, *Peter Grimes* (Cambridge Opera Handbooks; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 148.

(16) E. M. Forster, "George Crabbe: The Poet and the Man" (1941); Brett, *Peter Grimes*, p. 4.

(17) Brett, *Peter Grimes*, p. 2.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

See also from Grove Music Online

Peter Grimes

Benjamin Britten

## SOCIAL THEMES AND LEITMOTIVES

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 5 Standoff (I)

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

The “social problematic” may have been the initial impetus for Britten and Pears to build their scenario around the figure of Peter Grimes, but the portrait (already emphasized by Forster) of the furtive outcast brooding in the lonely estuary engaged a different level of response in them. It led to the thorough recasting of the title role, and the whole surrounding dramatic plot. “A central feeling for us,” Britten later told an interviewer,

was that of the individual against the crowd, with ironic overtones for our own situation. As conscientious objectors we were out of it. We couldn't say we suffered physically, but naturally we experienced tremendous tension. I think it was partly this feeling which led us to make Grimes a character of vision and conflict, the tortured idealist he is, rather than the villain he was in Crabbe.<sup>18</sup>

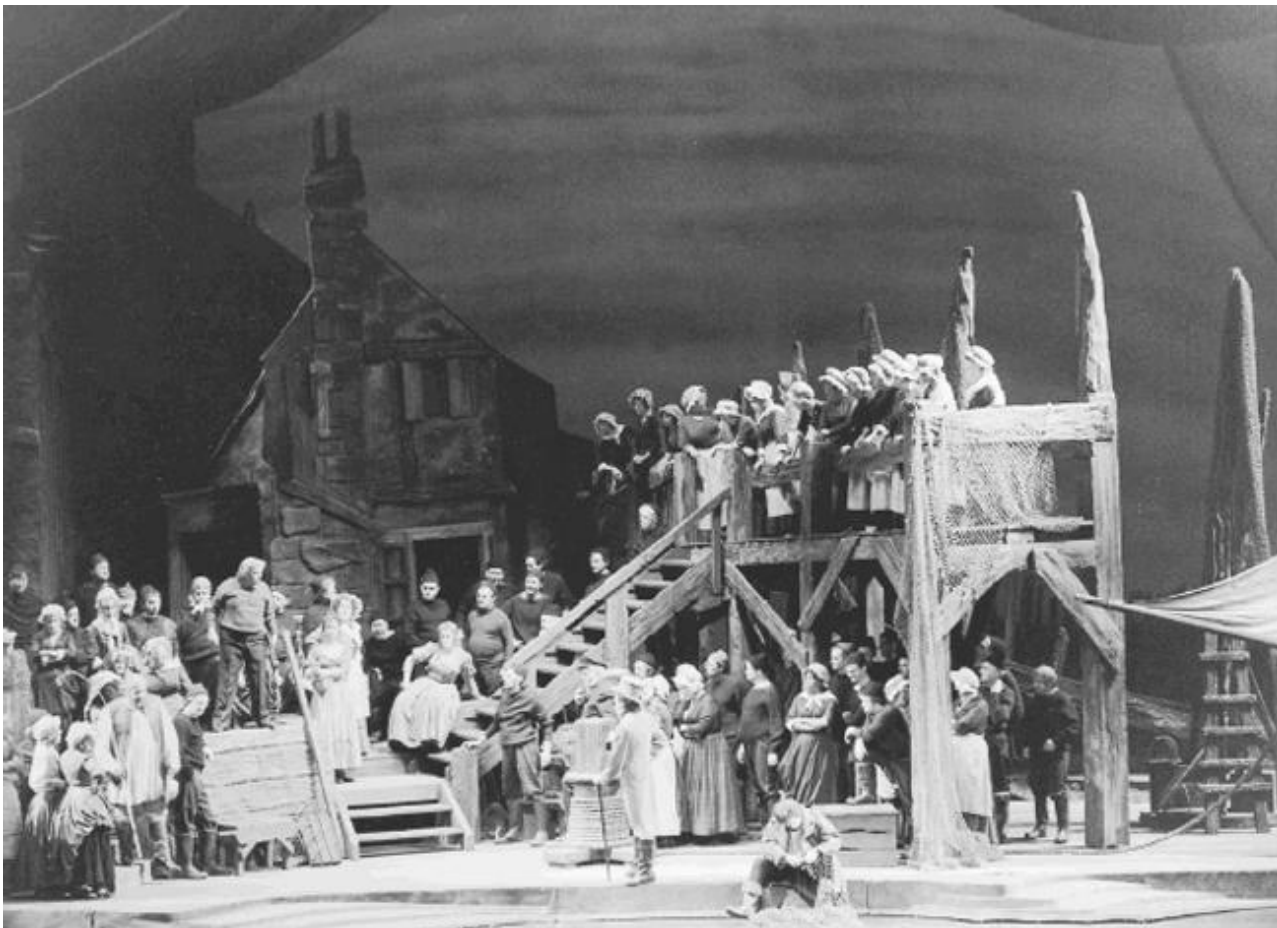


fig. 5-2 Britten's *Peter Grimes* in its first production, Sadler's Wells Company, London (now the English National Opera), 1945.

Like Shostakovich in *The Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (another opera that had impressed Britten and that he would emulate), the composer saw his task with respect to his title character as one of exoneration. He and Pears went even further than Shostakovich or Berg had gone in softening the portrait of their hero, making him the innocent (if blundering) victim of prejudice and unjustified persecution. As Pears put it in an article advertising a broadcast performance in 1946, "Grimes is not a hero nor is he an operatic villain." What is he then?

He is very much of an ordinary weak person who, being at odds with the society in which he finds himself, tries to overcome it and, in doing so, offends against the conventional code, is classed by society as a criminal, and destroyed as such. There are plenty of Grimeses around still, I think!<sup>19</sup>

In the opera Grimes is given two apprentices, not three. The Prologue, unprecedented by any overture, portrays an inquest into the death of the first, who had died of thirst aboard Grimes's boat during an ill-advised journey of several days to London. The death is attributed to "accidental circumstances," but Grimes is given a warning not to expect the benefit of the doubt in the future.

To reduce the story, as Britten and Pears recast it, to its barest bones: in act I, Grimes (against the advice of the inquest magistrate) procures another apprentice with the assistance of Ellen Orford, the village schoolteacher (a character transplanted from a different part of Crabbe's *The Borough*), whom he hopes to marry after clearing his name and gaining the town's respect by prospering. In act II, against Ellen's passionate entreaties, Grimes forces the exhausted (and, as Ellen has discovered, roughly treated) new boy out to sea on a Sunday in pursuit of a big shoal of herring. Or so he intends; goaded to hurry perilously by Grimes (who hears an approaching posse of villagers opposed to his plan), the apprentice loses his footing on a cliff side and falls—again accidentally—to his death. In act III, the apprentice's jersey is discovered on the beach and a manhunt is organized to bring Grimes to justice; he eludes them, but turns up later, dazed and incoherent, and is discovered by Ellen and by Captain Balstrode, a retired skipper (and Peter's only other defender), who now orders him to row out to sea and sink his boat rather than face the implacable if mistaken judgment of the townspeople.

But are they mistaken? Grimes, while no murderer, is indeed responsible for the boy's death. Yet without the fanatical posse of villagers at his heels, he would not have treated the boy so recklessly. The theme of ambiguously shared guilt, already broached by Crabbe, is thus starkly dramatized. The preponderance of guilt is subtly shifted to the townspeople by showing them biased against Grimes from the start, and by showing him to be, as Britten put it, an idealist, full of poetic visions and wholesome aspirations, and therefore morally superior, at least by inclination, to the crowd that condemns him—just as, in the view of the opera's creators, their own status as conscientious objectors was morally superior to that of a society then engaged in bloody warfare, which persecuted pacifists, and yet to which they were now committed to return. (Although Britten and Pears were ultimately dealt with leniently on the strength of their artistic reputations, their fears were not unjustified: the less lucky Michael Tippett was imprisoned for refusing military service in 1943, shortly before Britten embarked on the score).

As soon as the character was reconceived in this way it became possible to assign his part to Pears's tenor range rather than to the traditional villain's baritone, as in the earliest scenario drafts. That may even have been a reason in itself for the transformation of the title role. The most explicit portrayal of Grimes's positive side comes at the end of the first scene in act I, right before a big storm—obviously symbolic but, given the locale, also realistic—blows up. Balstrode exhorts Peter to marry Ellen before taking a new apprentice, so as to quiet gossip and give himself a fresh start. Grimes rejects the idea. "I have my visions, my fiery visions," he insists. "They call me dreamer, they scoff at my dreams and my ambition." But first he'll make himself rich—"These

**Borough gossips listen to money, only to money”—and then he'll marry Ellen. In this way he will achieve *peace*—a word that, as we can imagine, carried for Britten and Pears a powerful multiple charge. The last words in the scene, sung right before the storm breaks in the orchestra (an entr'acte famous in its own right as a concert piece), is Peter's apostrophe to peace (Ex. 5-1):**

- What harbour shelters peace,
- Away from tidal waves, away from storms?
- What harbour can embrace
- terrors and tragedies?
- With her there'll be no quarrels,
- with her the mood will stay.
- Her heart is harbour, too,
- where night is turned to day.

The image shows a musical score for voice and piano, divided into four systems. The first system features a vocal line with the word "What" and piano accompaniment with a *ppp* dynamic. The second system includes lyrics "har - bour shel - ters peace," and features piano accompaniment with *pp* dynamics and woodwind parts for Flute and Clarinet. The third system has lyrics "a - way from ti - dal waves, a - way from storms," with piano accompaniment marked *ppp* and a *marcato* tempo. The fourth system contains the lyrics "What har - bour" and includes a *Largamente* section with *pp* dynamics. Various performance instructions like *espres.*, *Str.*, *Fl. Clar.*, *Tpt.*, and *Trb.* are present throughout the score.

P

*a tempo*

can embrace ter-rors and tra-ge-dies?

This system shows the beginning of a musical phrase. The vocal line starts with a half note 'can', followed by a quarter note 'em', and a half note 'brace'. The piano accompaniment features a treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a 4/4 time signature. The right hand plays a series of eighth notes, while the left hand provides a steady bass line. A piano dynamic marking 'pp' is present.

P

50

With her there'll be no

*pp espr. e sost.*

Hns.

*pp*

This system begins at measure 50. The vocal line has a long note for 'With' followed by 'her there'll be no'. The piano accompaniment continues with a treble clef and two sharps key signature. The right hand has a complex texture with many beamed notes. The left hand has a bass line with some rests. Dynamics include 'pp' and 'pp espr. e sost.'.

P

*più f*

quar-rels, With her the mood will stay.

*espress.*

This system continues the musical phrase. The vocal line has a long note for 'quar-rels,' followed by 'With her the mood will stay.'. The piano accompaniment features a treble clef and two sharps key signature. The right hand has a complex texture with many beamed notes. The left hand has a bass line with some rests. Dynamics include 'più f' and 'espress.'.

The image displays a musical score for Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*, Act I, scene 1, titled "What Harbour Shelters Peace?". The score is presented in three systems, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment.

- System 1:** The vocal line begins with the lyrics "Her breast is har - bour". The piano accompaniment features a melodic line with a long note and a piano dynamic marking *pp*.
- System 2:** The vocal line continues with "too, Where night is turned to day." The piano accompaniment includes dynamic markings *espress.*, *cresc.*, and *sempre*.
- System 3:** This system is marked "Curtain" and features triplets and a forte dynamic marking *f*.

ex. 5-1 Benjamin Britten, *Peter Grimes*, Act I, scene 1, "What Harbour Shelters Peace?"

The words are by Montagu Slater, Britten's old collaborator in the Left Theatre, who accepted the task of turning the scenario into a full-fledged libretto after Isherwood, Britten's first choice, declined. The music, while conventionally lyrical and voice-dominated, hence "Verdian" rather than "Wagnerian" (to cite the pigeonholes into which twentieth-century operas were customarily slotted), consists nevertheless of a tissue of tiny leitmotives. One is the rising ninth with which Peter's long-breathed "peaceful" phrases all begin. It is first heard at the end of the Prologue, at the resolution of an unaccompanied passage (which Britten somewhat ironically called the "love duet") in which Ellen calms the distraught Peter at the end of the inquest (Ex. 5-2). The two singers begin at odds (indeed, in seemingly "remote" keys linked by the shared  $A \flat G \sharp$ ), and achieve *all'unisono* concord in Ellen's E major.



Another leitmotif, more obvious in the context of Ex. 5-1, is one associated with the gathering storm, to which Grimes sings lines—"away from tidal waves, away from storms," and "terrors and tragedies"—that contrast with the peace for which he longs, as his marcato vocal delivery contrasts with the dominating bel canto luxuriance of his vision.

9 Recitativo (senza misura)

PETER *pp* molto più lento  
The truth... the pi - ty... and the truth...

Ellen comes up to Peter.  
ELLEN *p dolce*  
Pe - ter, Pe - ter, come a - way!

*f agitato*  
Where the walls them-selves gos - sip of

*tranquillo*  
But we'll gos - sip too, and talk and rest...

*f*  
in - quest! While Peep - ing Toms

*f*  
nod as you go— You'll share the name of out - law too!

*sempre tranquillo*  
Pe - ter we shall re - store your name warmed by the

*f*  
new es - teem that you will find...

*f energico*  
Un - til the Bo - rough hate...

The image displays a musical score for an unaccompanied duet from Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*. It consists of four systems of music, each with a vocal line (E) and a piano accompaniment line (P). The lyrics are written below the vocal line. Performance markings such as *cresc. ed accel.*, *dim. e rall.*, *Più lento e tranquillo*, and *pp* are present. The score includes various musical notations like triplets, slurs, and dynamic markings.

**System 1:**  
 E: There'll be new shoals to catch, life will be kind.  
 P: — poi-sons your mind. Ay! — on - ly of

**System 2:**  
 E: Un - cloud - ed — the hot sun will spread —  
 P: drown - ing ghosts! Time will not for - get, — the dead — are

**System 3:**  
 E: his rays a - round. My voice out of the  
 P: wit - ness, and — fate is blind. Your voice out of the

**System 4:**  
 E: pain is like a hand that you can feel,  
 P: pain is like a hand that I can feel,

ex. 5-2 Benjamin Britten, *Peter Grimes*, unaccompanied duet at end of Prologue

The dramatic crux of the opera, the turning point that seals Peter's tragic fate, comes in the first scene of act II: his stormy quarrel with Ellen over his treatment of the boy, which culminates in his single act of violence on stage when in frustration he strikes out at Ellen and knocks her knitting basket to the ground. The scene is played against a background of Sunday morning congregational singing coming from the church offstage, one of the many "genre" touches that give the opera its naturalistic atmosphere. Like many astute musical dramatists, but especially Verdi, Britten sought every opportunity to integrate the foreground and background through irony. (Another instance came during the previous act, when Grimes, awaiting the arrival of the new apprentice in the town tavern at the height of the storm, tries to join in a round that the townspeople are singing to keep their spirits up, but fails so miserably to keep the tune that he almost wrecks the song for everyone; what could more graphically convey his condition as a social misfit?)

As this calamitous climax approaches, Ellen suggests that the two of them may have been mistaken in thinking that together they might have ended the pattern of cruel behavior that had brought the town's suspicion on Grimes. He flies into a rage (Ex. 5-3a), mocking the comfort he had formerly taken in his vision of domestic tranquillity by singing a contorted parody of the rising-ninth motif (“Wrong to plan! Wrong to try! Wrong to live! Right to die!”) that first fails to achieve its goal, stalling at F, a major seventh above the starting note (pushed further, but only as far as an octave), and finally reverses direction, crashing back precipitously from the high A $\flat$  that had been the original goal.

The image shows a musical score for Peter Grimes, Act II, scene 1, titled "Wrong to plan!". The score is for Peter, marked "PETER" and "sf con forza". The music is in 4/4 time and features a rising-ninth motif. The lyrics are: "Wrong to plan! Wrong to try! Wrong to live! Right to die!". The score includes dynamic markings such as "sf", "fz", "f", and "pp". The piano accompaniment is marked "fz" and "f".

ex. 5-3a Benjamin Britten, *Peter Grimes*, Act II, scene 1, “Wrong to plan!”

That F is an ominous note for more reasons than its not being A $\flat$ . It had been functioning all during the scene as one of the offstage choir's reciting notes (in alternation with B, a sinister tritone away), to which Grimes's tormentors had been singing their unwittingly ironic, hypocritically moralizing commentary to the foreground events. As the crisis nears, the congregation, chanting on F, takes up the Creed. Their note passes to a pair of horns that provides a steady dissonant pedal to underscore the quarrel onstage—dissonant, that is, until Ellen joins their note with the terrible words, “Peter, we've failed!” (Ex. 5-3b).



And now we have the explanation for his hopeless final acceptance of Captain Balstrode's legally unjustified sentence of death.

The phrase to which Grimes has sung his exit line (and death warrant) now becomes the leitmotif that will dominate the rest of the scene, and more. Immediately repeated by braying brass in a raucous sequence to fix it in the listener's memory, it then becomes the main theme of the choral episode that depicts the gathering of the posse that will eventually intrude on Grimes's hut and bring about the tragic dénouement. But it is not only a theme: it pervades the music, serving now as accompaniment, now as offstage organ voluntary, and sometimes with its contour partially inverted.

The musical score consists of five staves. The top three staves are for vocalists: Auntie (soprano), Boles (soprano), and Keene (bass). They all sing the lyrics "Grimes is at his exercise!". The fourth staff is for the Full Organ, playing a complex accompaniment. The fifth staff is for the strings, playing a rhythmic pattern. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (f, cresc., molto rall., Presto), tempo markings, and articulation marks.

ex. 5-4 Benjamin Britten, *Peter Grimes*, Act II, scene 1, "Grimes is at his exercise"

Although it involves real-time action, the episode is constructed in part like an aria with a refrain; and that refrain, sung to the new leitmotif, is the chilling line from Crabbe (one of the few original verses to survive into the libretto) that had established both the town's contempt for Grimes and their indifferent complicity: "Grimes is at his exercise" (Ex. 5-4). The climax comes when the whole town (excepting Ellen and Balstrode) shout the charge of "Murder!" to the strident inversion of the ninth in which Grimes had vested all his hope (Ex. 5-5).

All rush off but for a quartet of women, including Ellen, who remain alone onstage and sing one of the opera's famous set pieces, a pained commentary on the harsh life of the fishing community and the toll it takes on morals—a commentary given added ironic point by being sung, apart from Ellen, by the innkeeper ("Auntie") and her "nieces," the girls she keeps to provide the men of the town with comfort services: three women, in other words, identified by hypocritical convention as immoral, but alone (with Ellen) exhibiting a humanity which the town's more respectable citizens have been exposed as lacking.

The image shows a musical score for Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*, Act II, scene 1, "Murder!". It consists of four vocal staves (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and a piano accompaniment. The vocal parts are in a quartet, with lyrics "kind and to help... Mur der!" and "Mur der!". The piano part includes dynamic markings like *fff* and *fp*. The score is in G major and 3/4 time.

ex. 5-5 Benjamin Britten, *Peter Grimes*, Act II, scene 1, "Murder!"

Their lyrical quartet is mainly a respite from the mordant leitmotivity of the rest of the scene, but even here a note of irony lurks to complement the irony of Slater's text, with its reference to the "bitter treasure of [the menfolks'] love." A pair of flutes introduces each verse of the quartet with a dissonant ritornello (sometimes compared with the voices of seagulls supplementing the rocking waves of the sea as depicted in the accompanying strings) that in its two phrases spans a pair of descending ninths, now irrevocably associated with Grimes's tragedy.

We are not finished with the main leitmotif of that tragedy, however. "God have mercy upon me," also known as "Grimes is at his exercise," now reverberates—at its original pitch, stretched out to a length of eleven beats, and unfolding at the slow tread of a funeral march replete with muffled drumbeats—as the ground bass of the orchestral passacaglia that serves as interlude between the two scenes of act II (Ex. 5-6). Like Berg's *Wozzeck* and Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth*, Britten's opera relies heavily on interludes, not only as a way of filling the time between scenes, but as a vehicle of manipulative authorial commentary.

The interludes in *Peter Grimes*, it has been observed, alternate in function between scene setting (at the beginning of acts) and meditations on the hero's fate (in the middles), with the Storm in the middle of act I combining both roles. Britten's Passacaglia directly parallels the one that comes midway through the second act of Shostakovich's opera. Like the latter, and like the much shorter entr'acte after the murder in the third act of *Wozzeck*, it forces the audience to reflect obsessively (along with the title character) on a cataclysmic turn of events. In an early draft, Britten had associated the passacaglia with the "boy's suffering," and by using a solo viola in counterpoint against the ground at the outset, turns the interlude into a personal lament (an impression the use of solo strings conventionally conveys; one does not have to know that the viola was the instrument that, after the piano, Britten played best).

## Notes:

(18) Murray Schafer, *British Composers in Interview* (1963); quoted in Brett, *Peter Grimes*, p. 190.

(19) Pete Pears, "Neither a Hero Nor a Villain" (1946); Brett, *Peter Grimes*, p. 152.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

See also from Grove Music Online

Allegory: The 20th century

Peter Grimes

Sexuality in music

## ALLEGORY (BUT OF WHAT?)

Chapter: CHAPTER 5 Standoff (I)

Source: MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

Andante moderato (♩ = 56 at the start)

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system is for the piano, starting with a tempo marking of 'Andante moderato (♩ = 56 at the start)' and dynamics of 'pp' and 'deliberato'. The second system is for the solo viola, marked 'Solo Vla.', with dynamics 'pp espress.', 'pp', and 'p'. The third system returns to the piano, with dynamics 'dim.', 'pp', 'p', 'f', and 'dim.'. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

ex. 5-6 Benjamin Britten, *Peter Grimes*, Passacaglia (Interlude IV), beginning

Britten's and Pears's strong personal identification with the title character has already been cited as a motive not only for composing the opera in the first place, but also for the hefty alterations that distinguish the musical treatment from the original poem. ("Neglect Crabbe," one critic warned audiences, if they wanted to be able to see the characters "from the composer's standpoint" and really understand the opera.<sup>20</sup>) That identification is most conspicuous in the libretto when Grimes rejects Balstrode's suggestion that he seek employment as a merchant seaman rather than put up with the difficulties of life in the town, saying "I am native, rooted here/by familiar fields,/marsh and sand,/ordinary streets,/prevailing wind." Anyone who knew Britten's own circumstances, driven by homesickness from the safety of voluntary exile to the uncertainties of life within a



possibly hostile society at war, could recognize these lines as autobiography; and many did.

To think along these lines is to turn the opera into allegory. How one reads an allegory, of course, depends to a considerable degree on what one has on one's own mind. To the American literary critic Edmund Wilson, who happened to catch the first production on a visit to London, the opera seemed an allegory of the war just past. "This opera could have been written in no other age," he asserted, "and it is one of the very few works of art that have seemed to me, so far, to have spoken for the blind anguish, the hateful rancors and the will to destruction of these horrible years."<sup>21</sup> He saw these dire features embodied in the character of Grimes himself, whose violent nature he read, at first, as symbolizing defeated Germany:

He is always under the impression, poor fellow, that what he really wants for himself is to marry Ellen Orford and to live in a nice little cottage with children and fruit in the garden "and whitened doorstep and a woman's care." Above all, he wants to prove to his neighbors that he is not the scoundrel they think him, that he really means no harm to his apprentices and that he will make a good family man. But he cannot help flying into a fury when the boy does not respond to his will, and when he gets angry, he beats him; and his townsmen become more and more indignant.<sup>22</sup>

Whether Wilson really entertained this curious and limited view of the action, or whether he included it in his essay just to offset his final interpretation, is hard to say; but in the end he comes to see it more the way the opera's creators evidently intended:

By the time you are done with the opera—or by the time it is done with you—you have decided that Peter Grimes is the whole of bombing, machine-gunning, mining, torpedoing, ambushing humanity, which talks about a guaranteed standard of living yet does nothing but wreck its own works, degrade or pervert its own moral life and reduce itself to starvation. You feel, during the final scenes, that the indignant shouting trampling mob which comes to punish Peter Grimes is just as sadistic as he. And when Balstrode gets to him first and sends him out to sink himself in his boat, you feel that you are in the same boat as Grimes.<sup>23</sup>

Not that the reading of an allegory must conform to the author's precise intentions (or even that it can, since we can never be sure that we know the latter). Britten and Pears very likely read Wilson's critique with a mixture of gratitude and bewilderment: gratitude that he grasped something of the social theme and identified as they did with Grimes, bewilderment that he was able to read his own cynically bleak view of "the whole of humanity" into their work. But whether or not one accepts Wilson's reading, or any particular one, some level of allegorical interpretation seems necessary if the opera is to succeed in its moral, and even its musical, objective. For the music has painted Grimes as an innocent man, and yet he perishes as a guilty one. It does not add up, as the critic J. W. Garbutt forcefully argued in an article that appeared almost two decades after the first performance—and it is already a remarkable testimony to the opera's status as a modern classic that debate about its meaning should have continued even that long. As recently as July 2004, in fact, the London *Guardian* carried an article that refused point-blank either to neglect Crabbe or to consider allegorical readings, condemning the work as "a powerful but an inadvertently immoral opera, that seeks (shades of *Lady Macbeth*) to justify an irredeemable criminal"<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless "the ending is dramatically memorable,"<sup>25</sup> Garbutt wrote. Few have disagreed. Grimes's mad scene (Ex. 5-7), which follows upon (and effectively silences) the last orchestral interlude, is a nearly incoherent recitative, accompanied by the offstage voices of the posse calling his name and by a single tuba impersonating a distant foghorn. Whatever rudimentary structure it has is provided by a medley of melodic reminiscences that sum up the action Grimes obsessively recalls. Ellen approaches, offering to take him home; he responds with a hopeless reprise of Ex. 5-1, transposed down a semitone. Finally, Balstrode approaches and, *in spoken dialogue*, issues the death sentence. Peter disappears in silence. A reprise of the Interlude that opened Act 1 then shows the Borough awakening to a new day.

Joseph Kerman, in one of the earliest American reviews, marveled at the way in which “music is reduced successively to absolute zero”<sup>26</sup> as the title character is destroyed. Dramatically memorable, indeed. “But is it dramatically just?” asks Garbutt:

The musical score is divided into two systems, each labeled 'CHORUS (c-f)'.  
 The first system includes:  
 - Soprano part: 'Stea - dy! There you are! near-ly home!' with dynamics *pp* and *sempre ad lib.*  
 - Alto part: 'Grimes!' with dynamics *pp*  
 - Piano accompaniment: 'Distant FOG-HORN (Tba. 'off)' with dynamics *pp* and a *morendo* marking.  
 The second system includes:  
 - Tenor part: 'What is home? Calm, as deepwa-ter. Where's my home? Deep, in calmwa-ter.' with dynamics *pp*  
 - Soprano part: 'Wa-ter will drink my sor-rows dey, And the tide will turn...' with dynamics *pp* and a *FOG-HORN (a tempo)* marking.  
 - Alto part: 'Stea - dy! There you are! Near-ly home! The first one died, just died.' with dynamics *pp* and markings *(poco animato)* and *(rall.)*  
 - Tenor part: 'The o-ther slipped, and died... and the third will... 'Ac - ci-den-tal cir-cum-stan-ces.' with dynamics *p* and markings *(animato)*, *(rall.)*, and *poco mosso*  
 - Piano accompaniment: 'Wa-ter will drink his sor-rows... my sor-rows dey, and the tide will' with dynamics *pp* and markings *espr.* and *ten.*

turn... Pe-ter Grimes!...

SOPRANO  
pp> Grimes!... Grimes!...

ALTO  
pp> Grimes!...

TENOR  
mf Pe-ter Grimes!...

BASS  
mf Pe-ter Grimes!...

Fog-horn  
pp < > püf < >

vivace

Here you are! Here I am! hur - ry, hur - ry, hur - ry! hur - ry, hur - ry!

T.  
püf Pe-ter Grimes!... dim.

B.  
püf Pe-ter Grimes!... dim.

Now is gos sip put on trial. Bring the branding iron and knufe for what's done now is done for life!

T.  
PPP

B.  
PPP

ex. 5-7 Benjamin Britten, *Peter Grimes*, Act III, scene 2 (Grimes's mad scene)

Had he some real guilt to atone for, the ending would have been meaningful as well as memorable: the tragic inevitability which Crabbe manages to convey as a force behind his narrative would have lent itself to the opera. But in the absence of established guilt, Peter is accepting death merely because of the Borough's desire for revenge. Balstrode at this moment acts as the Borough's executioner; mentally weakened, Peter submits. And the Borough celebrates its easy triumph with its routine performances, in the "cold beginning of another day."<sup>27</sup>

Garbutt concludes that the opera succeeds despite the dramatic flaw at its conclusion, owing to the sheer brilliance of Britten's music. "Clearly there is a remarkable musical power in this opera, so dominating our response that we can accept the self-contradictory figure of Peter." And yet his very critique, premised on his

refusal to accept that self-contradictory figure, shows his conclusion to be unfounded. More recent critics, notably Philip Brett, have suggested that there is indeed a level at which the contradiction is resolved (or, more precisely, eliminated) through allegory. But the crucial allegory entailed so touchy and ticklish and unresolved a social issue in contemporary life that (as Ellen says when she finds the apprentice's jersey) it became "a clue whose meaning we avoid."

That issue is homosexuality: or more specifically, hidden, "closeted" homosexuality, "the love that dare not speak its name," which was for many, and remains for some, a tormented way of life. Among them were Britten and Pears. That they were "out of it"—social misfits—not only as conscientious objectors but as homosexual lovers was widely known (that is, widely and correctly assumed) at the time of their exile and return. It has been plausibly adduced as one of the reasons for their emigration, along with Auden and Isherwood and many others: "that desire," as Philip Brett describes it, "so common in young gay men, to seek anonymity and freedom by going to the big city, the far-off country—any place, that is, away from the home where they feel at best half-accepted."<sup>28</sup> And it must surely have contributed to the "tremendous tension" that, as Britten put it in a paragraph already quoted, he and Pears "naturally" experienced at the time of their return from America, and led them to transform their Peter Grimes into "a character of vision and conflict."

Their apprehension was justified. Homosexual acts between consenting adults were illegal in Britain and (as the case of Oscar Wilde so dramatically demonstrated) could be vengefully prosecuted, no matter how eminent the offender. Even when unprosecuted, they could brand otherwise respectable figures with a social stigma. This definitely happened to Britten and Pears. Their musical achievements, and the punctilious discretion with which they conducted themselves in public (no longer so pressingly demanded of homosexual couples by today's society), allowed them to become the world famous recipients of official honors (a knighthood for Pears, a peerage for Britten). But they were never at liberty to acknowledge their relationship: the closest Britten ever came was to refer to Pears in a speech as "a congenial partner" with whom "I like giving concerts."<sup>29</sup> And as their fame grew they were also increasingly the butt of cruel jokes intended to diminish them not only as persons but also as artists.

Such jokes were usually uttered in private. But just as fame could shield Britten and Pears from overt harassment, fame protected their most eminent detractor. Sad to say, the most open, public insults ever addressed to them were delivered by none other than Stravinsky, who in his last years dictated several volumes of memoirs and observations to his assistant Robert Craft, and used them to settle scores not only with many figures from his past but also with many contemporaries, including younger composers whom he had reason to envy. Britten, whose extraordinary public success represented something Stravinsky had possessed in youth but had tried in vain to recapture in later life, was a special object of the old man's taunts. He referred to Britten in print, maliciously, as a "bachelor composer,"<sup>30</sup> and even permitted himself a reference to "Aunt Britten and Uncle Pears"<sup>31</sup> in a letter that Craft published after his death.

Britten's and Pears's relationship, officially regarded not only as socially deviant but as diseased by the medical science of the time, was an open secret even when not disparaged. It was always among the subtexts that informed views of the works in which they collaborated. Read as part of an allegory depicting the plight of social misfits, Grimes's implicit acceptance of his "guilt" might be explained even without evoking sexuality. But in light of the stigma attached to his creators' sexual relationship, that acceptance is among the opera's most compelling social themes—one that communicated itself strongly to audiences even without speaking its name. In conjunction with the music, to whose powerful effects Garbutt drew attention, it surely contributed to the opera's lasting hold on the imaginations of listeners. Or as Brett puts it, "the successful realization of so modern a dramatic character is one of the main reasons for the opera's wide general popularity."<sup>32</sup>

Brett continues, "it is the special characteristic of the homosexual stigma (unlike that attached to being black or Jewish) that it is almost always reinforced at home and is thus the more readily 'internalized,' that is, accepted as valid and to a greater or lesser extent incorporated into the values and sense of identity of the person in

question.”<sup>33</sup> One who has internalized that shame might indeed regard himself as condemned, like Grimes, not for what he has done but for what he is. In addition to introspection (or the exercise of “common sense”), Brett supported his observations by citing the recent literature of “gay and lesbian” or “queer” theory, which has only existed as such since Britten's death. But in offering a convincing interpretation of the opera's most harrowing and problematical issue, namely Grimes's acknowledgment of guilt, Brett is surely justified in his once alarming, now celebrated assertion that “it is to the homosexual condition that *Peter Grimes* is addressed.”<sup>34</sup> As such an allegory, he further maintains, the work becomes “all the more poignant and relevant to people today,” whatever their sexual preferences or life style; for the social message is all the stronger for its being expressed—nonexplicitly yet unmistakably—in terms of what was in its day a still actively practiced intolerance. The opera thus becomes an indictment of its own contemporary society, not just “the Borough,” and Britten's treatment of what was necessarily in its day a tacit social issue can, by anticipating (or even helping to precipitate) changes in public attitudes, appear in retrospect to have been as prescient or “prophetic,” in its way, as Crabbe's or Büchner's had been. “One of the things Britten's operas (as well as his other works) seem to achieve is an exploration of various issues surrounding sexuality that the composer could not discuss in any other public form,” Brett writes, and he goes on to offer the judgment that Britten's “perseverance in this endeavor is one of the truly remarkable and even noble features of his career.”

That the treatment, though veiled in allegory, was conscious and deliberate can be seen clearly enough in retrospect if we reread Pears's characterization of Grimes (“an ordinary weak person,... classed by society as a criminal”) in the light of his and Britten's “crime.” And if any doubt remain, there is a letter from Pears to Britten, written in February or March 1944, about a month after Britten had started sketching the music, but only published in 1991, in which he reassured the composer that “the queerness is unimportant & doesn't really exist in the music (or at any rate obtrude).”<sup>35</sup> For they both knew that the theme of social persecution of homosexuals, however real and pressing, had to remain implicit if the opera was to be received by their contemporaries as bearing a “universal” message about human tolerance.

Armed with these insights, Brett located prefigurings of Grimes's “internalization” of society's condemnation much earlier in the opera than the turning point in the middle of act II. We have already seen what a potent dramatic device Britten made of the musical technique of inversion, turning Grimes's aspiring upward leap of a ninth into a crashing descent to connote the destruction of his aspirations and his doom. The other leitmotif introduced in Ex. 5-1, derived from the music associated with the gathering storm, can also be described, as Brett points out, as an inversion of the “hubbub” motif that accompanies the indignant muttering of the crowd in the opera's opening scene, the inquest Prologue (Ex. 5-8). Nor would it be irrelevant to add in this context, when dealing with a composer as literate and self-conscious as Britten, that the word “inversion” is a frequent code word or euphemism for homosexuality, not only in colloquial speech but also in works of literature (most famously, perhaps, in Proust's monumental novel, *In Search of Lost Time*).

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## Notes:

(20) Desmond Shawe-Taylor, review of first performance, *New Statesman*, 9 and 16 June 1945; Brett, *Peter Grimes*, p. 158.

(21) Edmund Wilson, *Europe without Baedeker* (2nd ed.; New York: Noonday Press, 1966); rpt. in Piero Weiss, *Opera: A History in Documents* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 308.

(22) *Ibid.* p. 309.

(23) *Ibid.*

(24) James Fenton, “How Grimes Became Grim,” *The Guardian* (London), 3 July 2004.

(25) J. W. Garbutt, "Music and Motive in *Peter Grimes*" (1963); Brett, *Peter Grimes*, p. 170.

(26) Joseph Kerman, "Grimes and Lucretia," *The Hudson Review* II (1949): 279.

(27) J. W. Garbutt, in Brett, *Peter Grimes*, p. 170.

(28) Brett, *Peter Grimes*, p.187.

(29) Benjamin Britten, *On Receiving the First Aspen Award* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 21.

(30) Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Themes and Episodes* (New York: Knopf, 1966), p. 101.

(31) Stravinsky to Nicolas Nabokov, 15 December 1949; Robert Craft, ed., *Stravinsky: Selected Correspondence*, Vol. I (New York: Knopf, 1982), p. 369n93.

(32) Brett, *Peter Grimes*, pp. 194–95.

(33) *Ibid.* p. 191.

(34) *Ibid.* p. 187.

(35) Peter Pears to Benjamin Britten, 1 March [?] 1944; Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed, eds., *Letters from a Life: Selected Letters and Diaries of Benjamin Britten* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), p. 1189.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

See also from Grove Music Online

Peter Grimes

Exoticism

A Midsummer Night's Dream

The Turn of the Screw

## EXOTIC/EROTIC

Chapter: CHAPTER 5 Standoff (I)

Source: MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system features vocal parts: TENOR I, TENOR II, BASS I, and BASS II. TENOR I has a melodic line with lyrics "When wo - men gos - sip" and a portamento crescendo. BASS I has a single note with lyrics "When" and a portamento crescendo. The second system features piano accompaniment: Str. (strings) with dynamics *pp stacc.* and *cresc.*, and w.w. (woodwinds) with a melodic line.

CHORUS

T. I  
the re - sult is some - one does - n't sleep at night! Then

T. II  
*pp* *cresc. portamento*  
When wo - men gos - sip the re - sult is some - one does - n't

B. I  
wo - men gos - sip the re - sult is some - one does - n't sleep at night!

B. II  
*pp* *cresc. portamento*  
When wo - men gos - sip the re - sult is some - one

ex. 5-8a Benjamin Britten, *Peter Grimes*, Prologue, "When women gossip..."

*marcato*  
a - way from ti - dal waves, a - way from storms,

ex. 5-8b Benjamin Britten, *Peter Grimes*, Grimes's repique in Act I, scene 1

None of this means that Peter Grimes was actually envisioned or presented by Britten and Pears as homosexual, or that he should be played that way. The plight depicted is not that of sexual "inversion" as such but rather its social consequences, which do not differ in the case of homosexuals from those affecting other persecuted minorities. And yet there are other aspects of the opera that indirectly broach matters associated with, or tangential to, the theme of homosexuality, matters that recur in later works of Britten as well. Unlike Chaikovsky or Copland, or any other previous composer known or thought to be homosexual, Britten did consciously (and perhaps also unconsciously) "thematize" the topic repeatedly. That, too, is an aspect of modernity, and a particularly compelling one that transcends the narrowly stylistic issues to which discussions of musical modernity are often confined.

In *Peter Grimes*, the title character's insistence on having boy apprentices, in conjunction with the evidence of his possible sadism toward them, broaches the issue of pederasty (man-boy love) and the consequent "corruption of innocence" that was long a recognized but unspoken concern in British society, where the



education of young boys so often took place in private, single-sex boarding schools. Britten himself attended such a school; his recent biographers have recorded the testimony of friends to whom he allegedly confided that he had been raped by a prep-school master. Incidents like this do not “explain” homosexuality; but they might predispose an artist to thematize man-boy attraction, as Britten did in *Death in Venice*, or violence toward children (as in *The Turn of the Screw*), or vengeful male treatment of overly attractive men (as in *Billy Budd*). Of all modern composers, Britten surely wrote the most for boy singers; and in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* he cast Oberon, the Fairy King, as a male falsettist (or “countertenor”)—a boy's voice in a man's body to impersonate a character who schemes for possession of a “changeling” (that is, a magically abducted) boy.

The falsetto voice quality is an “exotic” effect, and such effects have always been the bread and butter of opera (defined by Samuel Johnson in the eighteenth century, after all, as “an exotick and irrational Entertainment”<sup>36</sup>). Britten's operatic dramaturgy, and even his musical style, depends to an unusual degree on juxtapositions of exotic and “normal” or “unmarked” elements, perhaps further reflecting his view of himself as a “marked” man. The often startling effects that such juxtapositions produce is another genuinely modernistic aspect of Britten's manner, despite his refusal to accommodate his technique of composition—for “social” as well as musical reasons—to the direction of the midcentury avant-garde. (About serial technique, for example, he wrote, “I can see it taking no part in the music-lover's music-making; its methods make writing *gratefully* for voices or instruments an impossibility, which inhibits amateurs and young children.”<sup>37</sup>)

Britten's basic manner is well typified by the orchestral music that accompanies the short choral epilogue to the final scene in *Peter Grimes* (Ex. 5-9). It is a reprise of the Interlude at the beginning of act I, which sets the stage for a scene of routine life and work in the Borough, and seems to represent the natural environment in which that life goes on—wind, tide, perhaps skittering eddies, breezes, gulls. The texture is divided into three discrete timbral and tonal layers: a slow melody high in the violins and flute, a cushion of brass consisting of slow chords proceeding from and returning to an A-major triad, and a faster motif in the middle range (clarinet and harp).

In themselves, the various layers are all diatonic and, in themselves, stylistically unremarkable. What is remarkable is their conjunction, which involves both tonal contradiction and an impression of rhythmic discoordination. The middle voice alone is intrinsically somewhat unusual in the way it presents the familiar contents of the “white key” diatonic scale as a tonally ambiguous arpeggio of stacked thirds over two octaves. On two levels, then, Britten contrives idiosyncratic or extraordinary presentations of material that is part of every listener's ordinary musical experience. It is a technique that has been associated with surrealism, and that association seems to serve equally well to characterize Britten's brand of modernism, which is similarly given to “polytonal” effects. It is a technique of identifying the dramatic representation it accompanies or evokes as being at once realistic—*Peter Grimes* is often characterized as a *verismo* opera—and strange.

ALL SOPRANOS (sf) More and more semplice

The

(p)

cold be - gin - ning of an - o - ther day.....

SOPRANOS and ALTOS unis. (sf) *pp* *post.* *f* *dim.*

And hou - ses sleep - ing by the wa - ter side Wake..... to the men - sured

*pp* *poco cresc.* *mf* *dim.*

SWALLOW

S.A. There's a boat sink - ing out at sea.....

rip - ple of the tide.

*ppp*

ex. 5-9 Benjamin Britten, *Peter Grimes*, Act III, scene 2, chorale epilogue

In Britten's later operas, the juxtapositions take more extreme forms. When (as in *The Turn of the Screw* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) they evoke the supernatural, Britten's surrealism often involves playful or sardonic invocations of the "aggregate" or "total chromatic" (the basic stuff of serialism). The very opening curtain music in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, establishes a magical dream atmosphere with a progression of major triads with roots on all twelve pitch classes (the slow and regular string glissandos that connect them evoking the heavy breathing of sleepers), and the "sleep music" in act II is a passacaglia on a progression of four harmonies, each played in a different instrumental color, that exhausts the chromatic scale without any pitch repetitions (Ex. 5-10).

Slow and mysterious

pp

Strs.

less p

sim.

Slowly animating

p

cresc.

1 Lively ♩ = 63

cresc.

Detailed description: This block contains five systems of musical notation for a piano accompaniment. The first system is marked 'Slow and mysterious' and begins with a piano (pp) dynamic and 'Strs.' (strings). The second system includes 'less p' and 'sim.' (sustained). The third system is marked 'Slowly animating' and starts with a piano (p) dynamic. The fourth system continues the 'Slowly animating' section with a crescendo (cresc.) marking. The fifth system is marked '1 Lively ♩ = 63' and also features a crescendo (cresc.) marking. The notation includes treble and bass clefs, various note values, and dynamic markings.

ex. 5-10a Benjamin Britten, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, beginning of Act I

pp

muted Str.

muted Brass

W.W.

Harps, Percuss.

3 pitches

4 pitches

3 pitches

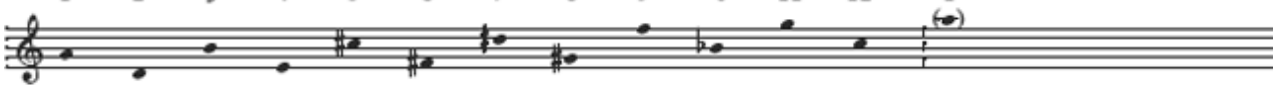
2 pitches

Detailed description: This block shows a musical score for four different instruments: muted strings (pp), muted brass, woodwinds (W.W.), and harps/percussion. Below each instrument part, the number of pitches is indicated: 3 pitches for muted strings, 4 pitches for muted brass, 3 pitches for woodwinds, and 2 pitches for harps/percussion.

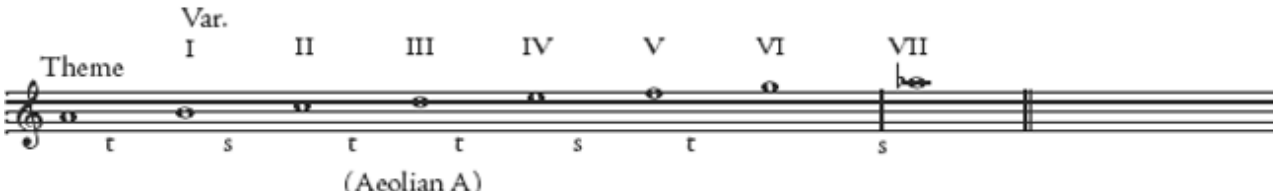
ex. 5-10b Benjamin Britten, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the passacaglia ground

In *The Turn of the Screw*, the spooky two-act chamber opera based on Henry James's novella about the corruption of innocent youth by evil spirits, the whole score is laid out over a twelve-tone harmonic grid (Ex. 5-11a). It consists of a prologue and sixteen scenes in different keys. The outer extremities have A as their tonal center; the middle scenes (last in act I, first in act II) have A $\flat$ . The successive centers in the first act can be laid out as an ascending A minor scale (plus the crowning A $\flat$ ); those in the second act form the inversion of the first: a descending mixolydian scale on A $\flat$  (plus the concluding A). Taken together, the two scales exhaust the pitches of the chromatic scale. Each tiny scene, moreover, is linked with the next by an interlude. The one that follows the Prologue is labeled "Theme" and all the others are Variations on it (see Ex. 5-11b and c).

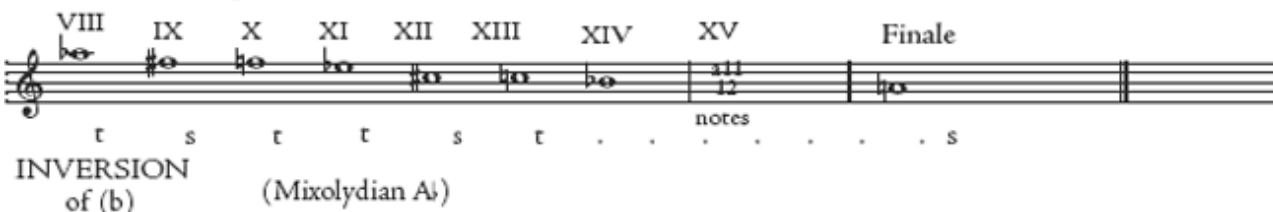
(a) Outline of THEME x  
as presented "on A"



(b) VARIATIONS of ACT I,  
on the following "centers"



(c) VARIATIONS of ACT II,  
on the following "centers"



ex. 5-11a Benjamin Britten, *The Turn of the Screw*, tonal plan (analytical chart by Peter Evans)

The Theme, consisting as it does of an ordering of the twelve pitch classes, could be called a tone row; analysts have pointed to it as Britten's accommodation with serialism (roughly contemporaneous with Copland's and Stravinsky's). Like the row in Copland's *Piano Quartet* (see chapter 3), Britten's theme separates the chromatic scale into two mutually exclusive whole-tone components, comparable to the complementary scales that govern the tonal progressions of the two acts. But unlike Copland's serialism or Stravinsky's, Britten's simple twelve-tone manipulations are unrelated to Schoenberg's techniques and could easily have occurred to a composer who had no knowledge of them. Rather, they are complete rotations or traversals (or "turns") of the chromatic spectrum within a traditional (if not an entirely conventional) key scheme. They illustrate, and were no doubt motivated by, the title concept—a turn that tightens a trap.

Very slow (♩ = 48)

Prolog.

"I will," she said.

① Pft. (Timp. trem.) *pp*

② (Hn. sust.) *cresc.*

③ (Harp trem.)

④ (Db. trem.)

⑤ (Bsn. sust.)

⑥ (Cl.)

⑦ (Vc.)

⑧ (Vla.)

broadening - - - - -

⑨ (Vln. II) *mp cresc.*

⑩ (Ob.)

⑪ (Fl.)

⑫ (Vln. I)

(aggregate) *molto*

ex. 5-11b Benjamin Britten, *The Turn of the Screw*, Theme with pitches numbered

Slow (♩ = 48)

sweetly

③

④

⑤

⑥

Str. *pp*

(W.W. sust.)

*cresc.*

gradually moving forward

ex. 5-11c Benjamin Britten, *The Turn of the Screw*, Variation I with pitches numbered

In Britten's last opera, *Death in Venice*, he at last hazarded a subject in which pederastic attraction was an explicit theme—and a destructive one, reflecting Britten's own puritanical acceptance (like Peter Grimes's) of society's judgment of his real-life predilections. Mann's novella concerns a great writer, Gustav Aschenbach (though to have been modeled on Gustav Mahler), who prides himself on the “Apollonian” control he exercises over his work, but who unexpectedly conceives an uncontrollable “Dionysian” passion for Tadzio, a young Polish boy he espies while on vacation in Venice. Aschenbach not only humiliates himself but even destroys himself physically on account of his homoerotic attraction. Unable to bear parting from the object of his forbidden affection, he responds too late to health warnings and perishes in an epidemic.

To convey Tadzio's unselfconscious, dangerous allure, Britten gave a new twist to an old device. He painted the boy (who does not sing) in exotic “oriental” colors, surrounding him with an aureole of Balinese gamelan music. It was not the first time Britten had used these sounds. He first encountered them in the United States, where he met the Canadian composer and ethnomusicologist Colin McPhee (1900–64), who had lived in Bali from 1931 to 1938. McPhee had made arrangements for two pianos of some of his transcriptions of gamelan performances. He and Britten recorded a few of them for the firm of G. Schirmer in 1941.



**fig. 5-3 Britten's *Death in Venice*, act II (Aschenbach observes Tadzio on the Lido beach in Venice). San Francisco Opera, 1997.**

The connection with homosexuality was drawn even then: McPhee, like many Euro-American artists, was drawn to Bali not only by its indigenous art, but also by its reputation as a sexual paradise where one could practice “deviant” sex with greater freedom and far less risk of social stigma than one could at home. “Thus,” the music historian W. Anthony Sheppard has observed, “Britten's first impressions of Bali and first exposure to gamelan music were filtered through McPhee's unique descriptions, transcriptions, and experiences.”<sup>38</sup>

Some scholars have detected echoes of McPhee's transcriptions in the second act of *Peter Grimes*. In 1956 Britten visited Bali and made some transcriptions of his own, mainly of music performed by a boys' gamelan that had actually been organized by McPhee a couple of decades earlier. Thus, even his hands-on experience with

gamelan “reinforced an imagined realm of sexual permissiveness that would remain in his Orientalist memory,” as Sheppard puts it, establishing a firm “connection between the musical exotic and homosexual opportunity.”<sup>39</sup>

Britten almost immediately turned his new gamelan experiences to creative account in a ballet, *The Prince of the Pagodas*, first performed at Covent Garden in 1957. Thus Britten's Tadzio music, for all its idiosyncratic associations, was the work of a genuine gamelan connoisseur. Like McPhee's, Britten's gamelan style employs authentic scales (as closely as Western instruments allow) in the seven-tone *pelog* tuning (Ex. 5-12), scored for an ensemble of mallet percussion instruments including xylophones, marimbas, glockenspiel, and vibraphone.

Like his nineteenth-century French and Russian predecessors, Britten has come in for some criticism on account of his appropriation of exotic music for sensual and sinister effect, a use that tends to encourage the stereotyping of “others.” His “orientalism” is more plainly metaphorical than most earlier examples, however; it does not portray an actual oriental subject (as Peter Grimes did not represent an actual homosexual protagonist), but characterizes Aschenbach's way of seeing the object of his desire, and his fantasies. The opera's distinctive musical style arises out of the confrontation of unmarked “Western” music, suggestive of normality and respectability, and the marked music of the East, suggestive of irrepressible and illicit desire. The conjunction presented Britten with new, dramatically charged opportunities for the sort of “surrealistic” layerings and juxtapositions that had always characterized his modernism.

Of course neither side “wins.” As in *Peter Grimes*, Britten confronts his audience with an unsolved problem, another mark of a quintessentially modernist sensibility. Interpreted by sympathetic critics like Brett and Sheppard, Britten's operas emerged in the late decades of the twentieth century with renewed force, as (in Sheppard's words) “personal allegories of specific contemporary social issues—whether of homosexual oppression, racial and ethnic intolerance, or of the pacifist's precarious position in a militant, nationalistic society.”<sup>40</sup>

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## Notes:

(36) Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets* (1779).

(37) Schafer, *British Composers in Interview*; quoted in Carpenter, *Benjamin Britten*, p. 336.

(38) W. Anthony Sheppard VI, *Revealing Masks: Exotic Influences and Ritualized Performance in Modernist Music Theater* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), p. 143.

(39) *Ibid.*

(40) *Ibid.*

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Exotic/Erotic : Music in the Late Twenti...

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

See also from Grove Music Online

Benjamin Britten

Britten: Reception, influence, significance

## TO SERVE BY CHALLENGING

Chapter: CHAPTER 5 Standoff (I)

Source: MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

The image displays a musical score for 'To Serve by Challenging' by Benjamin Britten. It consists of four staves. The top staff is a piano part with a 'P' dynamic marking and several circled chords. The second staff is a percussion part for 'Timp.' and 'D.B. col legno', with dynamics 'pp', 'mf (roughly)', and a triplet of notes. The third staff is a woodwind part for 'Xyl.' with dynamics 'pp' and 'mf (roughly)', and includes a 'Vib.' marking and 'etc.'. The bottom staff is a 'Pelog scale' in a single line.

ex. 5-12 Benjamin Britten, *Death in Venice*, gamelan stylization in Tadzio music

This is an achievement that the adoption of an alienated “avant-garde” stance, and a difficult musical style more typical of midcentury modernists, might well have thwarted. That was the real tension for Britten, in many personally crucial ways genuinely alienated from contemporary society, yet, as he put it, “longing to be used”<sup>41</sup> by that very society, seeing his most useful potential role as that of a faithful and acceptable gadfly who could, by pleasing his audience with satisfying art experiences, lobby for points of view that challenged, and sought to undermine, the complacency of the majority.

The quoted phrase in the foregoing paragraph comes from a speech Britten delivered in 1964, entitled “On Receiving the First Aspen Award.” This was a sizable cash prize authorized in 1963 by the Aspen Institute for

Humanistic Studies, an organization founded by Walter Paepcke (1896–1960), a wealthy Chicago industrialist and philanthropist, whose monetary investment turned Aspen, a former silver-mining boom town in Colorado, into a combined ski resort and summer cultural center. The Aspen Award was instituted to honor “the individual anywhere in the world judged to have made the greatest contribution to the advancement of the humanities.”<sup>42</sup> Britten received the award in particular recognition of his *War Requiem*, op. 66, a huge oratorio for three vocal soloists, mixed chorus, boys’ chorus, chamber orchestra, symphony orchestra, and organ, commissioned for the dedication of the rebuilt Coventry Cathedral, which had been bombed out during the Second World War, and first performed in the cathedral as part of its consecration ceremony on 30 May 1962. Like so many of Britten’s works, the *War Requiem* had ironic juxtaposition at its conceptual core. This time the Latin words of the traditional Requiem Mass, sung by the soprano soloist and the choruses with the large orchestra and organ, were juxtaposed with grim, posthumously published antiwar verses by Wilfred Owen (1893–1918), a pacifist poet killed in action a week before the armistice that ended World War I, sung by the tenor and baritone soloists, personifying soldiers, accompanied by the chamber orchestra.

The inclusion of Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau, a German baritone, in the original performing roster at Britten’s express behest turned the occasion into one of symbolic reconciliation between former enemies. It gave enormous added poignancy to the last of Owen’s poems, performed in juxtaposition with *Libera me, Domine* (“Deliver me, O Lord”), the final portion of the Requiem liturgy. The poem consists of a meditation on war’s waste of life in the form of a dialogue between a killed British soldier and a German whom he had previously killed. In the first performance, and in the recording made the next year under Britten’s baton, those roles were taken by Pears and Fischer-Dieskau.

The soprano soloist in the recording was the Soviet singer Galina Vishnevskaya, whose participation balanced that of Fischer-Dieskau as a reminder of the former wartime alliance between the hostile camps of the cold war. The work was received in England, along with the ceremony it accompanied, as a major historical event; it gave Britten, at least for a time, the sort of heroic and official public prominence otherwise enjoyed by modern creative artists only in the Soviet bloc (and only when they behaved). For the moment, it seemed, his formerly suspect pacifism was in harmony with the aspirations of his country, and this concord was reflected in the citation he was given at Aspen, which lauded him as “a brilliant composer, performer, and interpreter through music of human feelings, moods, and thoughts, [who] has truly inspired man to understand, clarify and appreciate more fully his own nature, purpose and destiny.”<sup>43</sup>

Britten used this moment of triumph to deliver a sermon at Aspen about the social responsibility of artists, and the responsibilities of society toward its artists. It can be read as a sustained metaphor for the conflict he had always faced between his condition and his aspirations, the risks he felt he had taken in life and in his art, and his satisfaction in having come through. “I want my music to be of use to people, to please them, to ‘enhance their lives’ (to use [the art critic Bernard] Berenson’s phrase),”<sup>44</sup> he said near the end of his address, and followed this up by taking an explicit and very emphatic stand regarding the crux (“History or Society?”) that informs this chapter and the next:

I do not write for posterity—in any case, the outlook for that is somewhat uncertain. I write music, now, in Aldeburgh, for people living there, and further afield, indeed for anyone who cares to play it or listen to it. But my music now has its roots in where I live and work.<sup>45</sup>

This theme was Britten’s mantra. Earlier in the talk he had already insisted, repetitiously and seemingly gratuitously, that it was after all “quite a good thing to please people, even if only for today. That is what we should aim at—pleasing people today as seriously as we can, and letting the future look after itself.”<sup>46</sup> Earlier still he had indicated why such a seemingly amiable, unobjectionable position had nevertheless to be advanced militantly:

There are many dangers which hedge round the unfortunate composer: pressure groups which demand true proletarian music, snobs who demand the latest *avant-garde* tricks; critics who are already trying to document to day for tomorrow, to be the first to find the correct pigeon-hole definition. These people are dangerous—not because they are necessarily of any importance in themselves, but because they may make the composer, above all the young composer, self-conscious, and instead of writing his own music, music which springs naturally from his gift and personality, he may be frightened into writing pretentious nonsense or deliberate obscurity.<sup>47</sup>

To those who saw themselves as living only in history, who treated their social peers as a hindrance, and who therefore continued to invest their art with an outdated aristocratic (or “high-culture”) aura of inaccessibility, Britten offered a prim pointer on manners: “it is insulting to address anyone in a language which they do not understand.”<sup>48</sup> But pieties were balanced with warnings. “Finding one’s place in society as a composer is not a straightforward job,” he asserted, leaving a great deal unsaid, especially when he hinted that “until such a condition is changed, musicians will continue to feel ‘out of step.’”<sup>49</sup> Matters are not helped, he went on, “by the attitude towards the composer in some societies.” First he indicted his own, “semi-Socialist Britain, and Conservative Britain before it,” which “has for years treated the musician as a curiosity to be barely tolerated.” But even greater dangers lurk to the left and right, he told his American audience:

In totalitarian regimes, we know that great official pressure is used to bring the artist into line and make him conform to the State's ideology. In the richer capitalist countries, money and snobbishness combine to demand the latest, newest manifestations, which I am told go by the name in this country of “Foundation Music.”<sup>50</sup>

Britten picked only three composers to praise by name, knowing that the praise would be provocative:

Recently, we have had the example of Shostakovich, who set out in his “Leningrad” Symphony to present a monument to his fellow citizens, an explicit expression for them of their own endurance and heroism. At a very different level, one finds composers such as Johann Strauss and George Gershwin aiming at providing people—the people—with the best dance music and songs which they were capable of making. And I can find nothing wrong with the objectives—declared or implicit—of these men; nothing wrong with offering to my fellow-men music which may inspire them or comfort them, which may touch them or entertain them, even educate them—directly and with intention. On the contrary, it is the composer's duty, as a member of society, to speak to or for his fellow human beings.<sup>51</sup>

As history, even as social history, not everything (perhaps not much) in this paragraph holds water, and Britten may have known that. But he was engaging in a not-so-covert polemic against the other side of the mid-twentieth-century divide. And he was met with rejoinders in kind.

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## Notes:

(41) Britten, *On Receiving the First Aspen Award*, p. 21.

(42) *Ibid.* p. 7.

(43) *Ibid.*

(44) *Ibid.* pp. 21–22.

(45) *Ibid.* p. 22.

(46) *Ibid.* p. 17 .

(47) *Ibid.* p. 14.

(48) *Ibid.* p. 12.

(49) *Ibid.* p. 14.

(50) *Ibid.* p. 15.

(51) *Ibid.* p. 12.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

## CHAPTER 6 Standoff (II)

### Music in History: Carter

Chapter: CHAPTER 6 Standoff (II)

Source: MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

## EXPLAIN NOTHING

Perhaps inevitably, the most widely noticed rejoinder to meet Britten's outspoken Aspen address (and the music it defended) came from Stravinsky, who went out of his way to deride the *War Requiem* and its social reception in an essay on recent music, ghostwritten by his assistant Robert Craft, that was first published in 1964 (the year of the lecture) and reissued in book form two years later.

“Behold the critics as they vie in abasement before the wonder of native-born genius,”<sup>1</sup> Stravinsky scoffed. He compared Britten with Hermann Goetz (1840–76), a forgotten German composer who enjoyed a rapturous critical promotion during his lifetime and for a few decades thereafter (George Bernard Shaw placing him “above all other German composers of the last hundred years save only Mozart and Beethoven”<sup>2</sup> —that is, above Wagner and Brahms). The inadequacies of Britten's “cinemascope epic” are sneeringly catalogued: “patterns rather than inventions,” “an absence of real counterpoint,” “a bounteous presence of literalisms” (like the use of timpani strokes where the text mentions “the drums of time”), and the “sedative” use of the organ. The concluding jab, “nothing fails like success,” makes explicit the underlying premise that giving pleasure to one's contemporaries precludes a genuinely “historical” achievement.

Stravinsky's ardent denunciation of the *War Requiem* gains added resonance in counterpoint with another ghostwritten review he had published slightly earlier, in which he had gone just as far out of his way to praise Elliott Carter's *Double Concerto for Harpsichord and Piano with Two Chamber Orchestras* (1961), a choice example of what Britten had termed “Foundation Music.” It had been commissioned, and the many rehearsals that preceded the first performance had been underwritten, by the Fromm Music Foundation, to whose sponsor, Paul Fromm, the work was dedicated. Ex. 6-1 shows a representative page (far from the most complicated) from the *Concerto's* score, chosen because Stravinsky happened to single it out for praise.



**fig. 6-1 Elliott Carter; photo, 1991.**

ex. 6-1 Elliott Carter, *Double Concerto*, p. 101 of the score

Surely the first thing that leaps out is how difficult this music must be to perform. The extreme fluidity of both rhythm and tempo are its most conspicuous features, closely followed by the enormous variety of detail, a bit bewildering in music so quiet. The atomistic texture is typical. Absent is anything that looks like a theme; instead there is a montage of rhythmic patterns, the majority of them consisting of strings of notes of equal value (allowing for the ubiquitous group accelerandos and ritardandos). Their interplay is what provides continuity and interest. It would be very difficult to deduce the harmonic principles that guide the counterpoint. Experimental analysis would quickly show that the music, while freely chromatic and fully “emancipated” in terms of dissonance treatment, cannot be referred to a tone row.

To guide listeners through this very unusual composition at the premiere, the composer offered the following



program note, which was reprinted as the sleeve note for a recording, also subsidized by the Fromm Foundation, that was issued shortly afterward. (It is quoted in full except for the first sentence, which repeats information given above):

Completed in August, 1961, it is an antiphonal work for two small orchestras each led by one of the soloists. The harpsichord is associated with an ensemble of flute, horn, trumpet, trombone, viola, contra-bass and percussion (largely metallophones and lignophones [i.e., instruments made of metal and wood]) while the piano is joined by an ensemble of oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, violin, cello and percussion (largely membranophones [i.e. drums with skin heads]). In addition to being isolated in space and timbre, the antiphonal groups are partially separated musically by the fact that each emphasizes its own repertory of melodic and harmonic intervals, the harpsichord ensemble: minor seconds, minor thirds, perfect fourths, augmented fourths, minor sixths, minor sevenths and minor ninths; the piano ensemble: major seconds, major thirds, perfect fifths, major sixths, major sevenths and major ninths. Each of these intervals is associated, for the most part, with a certain metronomic speed with the result that the speeds and their inter-relationships are also different for the two groups. Rhythmically the harpsichord is apt to specialize in derivations of the polyrhythm four against seven, while the piano ensemble uses five against three. These fields of specialization of the two groups are not carried out rigorously throughout the work but give way to the more important considerations which come from the fact that the two groups not only have different repertoires of musical characters, gestures, logic, expression, and "behavioral" patterns, but that all of these are meant to be combined with each group and from group to group and result in recognizable overall patterns. The motion of the work is from comparative unity with slight character differences to greater and greater diversity of material and character and a return to unity. The form is that of confrontations of diversified action-patterns and a presentation of their mutual interreactions, conflicts, and resolutions, their growth and decay over various stretches of time.

The Concerto, although continuous, falls into seven large interconnected sections. During the Introduction, the two groups in becoming progressively more differentiated state each facet of their material with greater and greater definition. The Cadenza for harpsichord presents in condensed form all the salient characteristics, rhythms and intervals of its ensemble. The *Allegro scherzando* is primarily for the piano ensemble with brief interruptions and comments by the other group. An *Adagio*, largely for the winds of both groups accompanied by accelerating and retarding figurations by the two soloists and the percussion joined occasionally by the strings, follows, and is concluded by an extended duet for the two soloists meeting at a stage in the piano's acceleration and the harpsichord's retardation only to separate as the piano proceeds toward its maximum speed while the harpsichord and its percussion proceed toward their minimum speed simultaneously.

The *Presto* is for harpsichord and all the other instruments except the percussion and the piano, which later constantly interrupts with fragments of the *Adagio*. Twice this soloist breaks into a short cadenza based on other elements of its material and its second cadenza leads to an amplification of the questioning inflections of the *Presto* by all the instruments with the percussion dominating. After a brief pause, the work closes with an extended Coda, using the entire ensemble in a series of long-phased oscillations (that include many subsidiary short-phased ones) from one group to the other, during which previous ideas are recalled in new contexts. Reversing the general plan of the Introduction (although not the musical one) these fragments lose their definition bit by bit, become shorter, sometimes more condensed, more dispersed, gradually merging into the slow waves of percussion rolls that move according to the basic polyrhythmic structure of the whole work.<sup>3</sup>

This fairly lengthy note has been quoted in full just to show how uninformative it is. Except for the matter of the relationship between intervals and metronomic speeds, which is left unexplained and arcane, the composer has disclosed nothing that an attentive hearing would not have revealed, perhaps with a peek at the score to

corroborate the point about intervallic “repertoires.” (A glance at the double bass part in Ex. 6-1 will mostly confirm the intervallic repertory of the “harpsichord ensemble;” the wind and cello parts will do the same for the “piano ensemble.”) In this it does not differ from the average descriptive sleeve note, often the work of office hacks. Nowhere is there any indication of purpose, whether for the assignment of intervals, or the “behavioral patterns,” or the “polyrhythmic structure,” or even for the sequence of events, the blow-by-blow narrative to which most of the note's detail is devoted. In other words, the description is entirely “formalist,” predicated on Clement Greenberg's assumption, quoted in the previous chapter, that an artwork's form is tantamount to its content, and that (in the case of music) nothing beyond the sounds themselves requires description, let alone explanation.

The only hint at purpose or content comes in the single sentence where “action-patterns” are described in terms of confrontations, interreactions, conflicts, resolutions, growth, and decay, all of these being human actions and life phases. Of course the use of such terms to describe the behavior of musical sounds had a long history by 1961, and it is by no means certain that those who read the note would necessarily think of the literal meaning of the words, or that they were meant to. Nor is any clue given as to what such actions might signify, or (to fasten only on the most obvious musical question) what constitutes a resolution in such a harmonic idiom. The sentence is no more helpful, in other words, than the rest. Take the word “time” out of the sentence, in fact, and it could as easily have been a description of a painting as of a musical composition. Such language might easily have slid unnoticed into an essay or review about abstract expressionist canvases—say an “action” painting by Jackson Pollock—of a kind that by 1961 dominated the museum world and the art market.

The central Adagio, in which rhythm and tempo are at their runniest, is sampled in Ex. 6-2. The ingenious notation, which allows a single conductor to coordinate simultaneously steady, accelerating, and retarding tempi, actually disguises the central fact that the wind instruments (the slowest-moving parts) play at a steady rate. The score, in other words, looks altogether different from how the music is meant to sound—itsself a fascinating aspect of the piece, if a somewhat baffling one. But why is all of this happening? Carter does not tell.

Britten would have spoken here of snobbery. Stravinsky, for his part, emphasized the Concerto's “interesting performance problems,”<sup>4</sup> commended Carter's choice of historical model (Berg's Chamber Concerto, he thought), then cheerfully confessed himself unable to understand the all but peerlessly patterned, detail-heavy music except in the broadest “gestural” terms. Giving it a twelve-tone pedigree suggests that Stravinsky was actually mistaken as to its technical premises, probably having made no attempt to parse its syntax. But Stravinsky did not think it ill bred of Carter to address him in a language he did not understand. Indeed, its very inscrutability magnified the Concerto's appeal, giving it an aura to which Stravinsky reacted as if to a religious revelation, declaring, “analysis as little explains a masterpiece or calls it into being as an ontological proof explains or causes the existence of God.”<sup>5</sup> Then came the words that have been endlessly repeated in the literature that has grown up around Carter's music: “There, the word is out. A masterpiece, by an American composer.” A masterpiece exists as such even (or especially?) when no one understands it, Stravinsky seems to imply. The process through which one recognizes a masterpiece, then, has more to do with pedigree than with cognitive intercommunication—with history, that is, not with society—and it is a matter of faith. Difficulty—especially conspicuous in Carter's music of the 1960s and 1970s, which had the most intricately detailed textures, the most complicated surfaces, and the most abstruse notation of any music of its time—was itself taken as an earnest of masterpiece status, as religious disclosure unveils what the Bible calls a “truth that passeth all understanding.” It is remarkable that Stravinsky, who derided British critics for their “abasement” before a false masterpiece, assumed that very same stance to acknowledge what he took to be a true one.

Charles Rosen, the pianist in the first performance of the Double Concerto, offered a secular variation of Stravinsky's piety when he wrote that “it is important for a radically new work to be understood only little by little and too late,” because “that is the only tangible proof we have of its revolutionary character.”<sup>6</sup> On the face of it both Rosen's and Stravinsky's remarks are examples of a special kind of tautology known as the assumption of a false converse: if masterpieces are inscrutable, then what is inscrutable is a masterpiece; if what is



(sempre rit.) -  
 ♩ = 140 . . ♩ = 118 . . ♩ = 99 . . ♩ = 83 . . ♩ = 140 . . ♩ = 118 . . ♩ = 99 . . ♩ = 83 . .

Picc.  
 Ho. 1  
 Tpt.  
 Tbn.  
 Perc. 1  
 Perc. 2  
 Hpsch.  
 Vla.  
 Cb.  
 (sempre rit.) -  
 ♩ = 140 . . ♩ = 118 . . ♩ = 99 . . ♩ = 83 . . ♩ = 140 . . ♩ = 118 . . ♩ = 99 . . ♩ = 83 . .

Ob.  
 Cl.  
 Bn.  
 Ho. 2  
 Perc. 3  
 Perc. 4  
 Pno.  
 Vln.  
 Vc.

**ex. 6-2 Elliott Carter, Double Concerto, Adagio, mm. 360–374**

Understood within the ideology of romantic historicism and its modernist extensions, the remarks are not difficult to interpret. If artists live only in evolutionary history, then their work has validity only to the extent that it makes a contribution to evolution. The most obvious contributions to evolution are revolutions. They address the future rather than the present. The only proper contemporary audience for a contemporary masterpiece, then, consists of evolutionary historians, whose awareness of historical process allows them to extrapolate from the past to the future. And sure enough, Carter's Double Concerto was given its very successful first performance at a concert held at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in conjunction with the Eighth Congress of the International Society for Musicology, at a time when evolutionary historicist views thoroughly dominated academic music studies. Carter's Concerto, from the moment of its unveiling, was a historic work in the narrowest sense of the word—the sense that, according to the ideology we have been tracing, specifically

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## Notes:

- (1) Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Themes and Episodes* (New York: Knopf, 1966), p. 13–14.
- (2) *The World*, 22 November 1893; in Bernard Shaw, *Music in London 1890–94*, Vol. III (New York: Vienna House, 1973), p. 100.
- (3) Elliott Carter, liner note to Epic Records BC 1157 (1962).
- (4) Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Dialogues and a Diary* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1963), p. 48.
- (5) *Ibid.* p. 49.
- (6) Charles Rosen, "One Easy Piece," *New York Review of Books*, February 1973; in Rosen, *Critical Entertainments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 283–84.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Neo-classicism

Nadia Boulanger

Carter: Early works

## FROM POPULISM TO PROBLEM SOLVING: AN AMERICAN CAREER

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 6 Standoff (II)

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

By the time Stravinsky and Rosen made their remarks, the view they upheld of Carter's music, and of musical value generally, accorded closely with the composer's own. But unlike them, Carter had evolved by slow degrees to the position they assumed as a given. Unlike Britten's, his development as a composer was sluggish and tortuous. The son of a wealthy lace importer, he never had to earn a living from his musical activity and was not particularly ambitious in his youth. His early training exactly paralleled Virgil Thomson's a decade earlier. From Harvard's Francophile music department he went to Paris to study for three years (1932–35) with Nadia Boulanger and came home a confirmed “neoclassicist.”

During the following decade, that of the Great Depression and the Second World War, his music conformed to the pastoral and Americanist idioms associated with Copland, whom he praised in a 1939 review for discovering “a kind of beautiful simplicity which bears a definite spiritual relationship to the simple, direct, and honest people of this continent.”<sup>7</sup> That same year Carter's ballet *Pocahontas* had its premiere performance by Ballet Caravan on a program that also included Copland's *Billy the Kid*. For his Symphony (1942), he took as a model Roy Harris's Third, in the words of Carter's pupil and biographer David Schiff “the unavoidable Great American Symphony of the day.”<sup>8</sup> In one respect, however, Carter's background differed significantly from those of his colleagues in the *Boulangerie*. As a teenager he had met and been befriended by Charles Ives, who was then nearing the end of his active career as a composer. Thus, even before his exposure to Nadia Boulanger he was familiar with, and affected by, the “ultramodern” American music, unknown in Europe, that Ives was bankrolling as the primary sponsor of Henry Cowell's New Music Editions: Ives's own music (particularly the Fourth Symphony, the *Concord Sonata*, and *Three Places in New England*) and the work of Cowell (both his music and his “idea-book” *New Musical Resources*), Carl Ruggles, and Ruth Crawford Seeger.

This was a music of optimistic romantic spirit and enthusiastic experimentalism that retained a strong maximalist thrust in the face of European retrenchment. His formative exposure to it caused psychological problems for Carter during his years of study with Boulanger (one of the retrenchment's guiding spirits) and during his flirtation with the going American populism of the Roosevelt years. Its influence may have hindered his “populist” music from making the easy contact with its intended audience that Copland's enjoyed. In any case, Carter came to see his “social” overtures as unrequited.

At the same time, Boulanger's impressive mastery of traditional craftsmanship and her pedagogical emphasis on professionalism made Carter somewhat squeamish about the provincial American modernism that had nurtured him before his European sojourn. He betrayed his ambivalence in a condescending review of Ives's *Concord Sonata*, faulting it for its conventional (that is, romantic) rhetoric, its lack of formal logic, and an esthetic sensibility that is “often too naive to express serious thoughts, frequently depending on quotation of well-known

American tunes, with little comment, possibly charming, but certainly trivial.”<sup>9</sup> The review caused a painful and permanent rift in Carter's personal relations with his former mentor; but of course he was writing to and about himself and his own creative impasse, giving advice not to Ives but to himself. It took him a decade to reconcile the contradictions in his own esthetic sensibility; and he only succeeded by resolutely purging it of social aspirations.

Over that decade Carter came back to terms with his “ultramodern” inheritance, in a series of works that on the one hand aspired, or reaspired, to the epic rhetoric of the *Concord* Sonata, which was ultimately traceable to the “transcendent” image of Beethoven that Ives worshiped. This leaning is especially noticeable in Carter's own burly and virtuosic Piano Sonata of 1946. On the other hand, his works of the forties embodied a “problem-solving” attitude toward technique that seemed to put the composer's professional interests front and center, suggesting the research model of modernism already encountered in John Cage and the postwar serialists both in America and in Europe (and anticipated by Cowell's handbook). Carter began to acquire the reputation of a musician's musician—an “original, responsible, serious, adult composer,” in the words of his friend and champion Richard Franko Goldman, “whose gifts have not been fully understood or widely appreciated,” who “regards each new work as being in some respects a problem peculiar to itself,” and who, in consequence, writes “music never lacking in skill but sometimes ingeniously uninteresting.”<sup>10</sup>

In the Piano Sonata, piano resonance itself—novel effects obtained by the use of the *sostenuto* pedal and by silently depressing keys—was the object of technical investigation (not that these effects were unrelated to the Sonata's monumental expressive goals). In smaller works, including *Eight Etudes and a Fantasy* for woodwind quartet and *Six Studies for Four Timpani* (both 1950), the research could seem to be self-motivated, as the use of the term “étude” already attests. “I had become very concerned with the nature of musical ideas,” Carter later wrote, “and started writing music that sought to find out what the minimal needs were for the kind of musical communication I felt worthwhile.”<sup>11</sup>

*Eight Etudes and a Fantasy* actually originated in a Columbia University classroom, where Carter was teaching a course in orchestration in the summer of 1949. He sketched ingenious little experiments in woodwind texture on the blackboard to stimulate his pupils' imaginations in writing little pieces of their own to be tried out by a little team of hired players. The objective, clearly, was to make much of little: to construct a coherent musical design out of a minimum of raw material. In the first etude, the material consists of big, crisscrossing intervallic leaps that map out a maximum of textural space in a minimum of time. In the fourth, the material consists entirely of slurred pairs of eighth notes describing a rising semitone, treated like the little tiles that make up a mosaic.

In Etude no. 3 (Ex. 6-3a), the material has been boiled down to a single D-major triad (in the middle range shared by all the instruments), sustained throughout in kaleidoscopically shifting timbres as the players' instruments spell one another by entering and fading out imperceptibly. It is a famous curio, only to be exceeded as a tour de force of economy by no. 7 (Ex. 6-3b), which takes a single sustained pitch, the G above middle C, as a “theme” to be varied by overlapping dynamic shapes and assorted articulations. Carter described it as “draw[ing] out of the fifteen possible tone colors and their combinations and variants due to dynamic and attack differences, a musical discourse entirely dependent on contrasting various types of ‘entrances’: sharp, incisive attacks as opposed to soft entrances of other instruments.”<sup>12</sup> Minimal needs, indeed. And yet the placement of a pair of loud unison attacks at the midpoint gives the seventh etude, despite its measly contents, a vivid shape.

Adagio possibile (♩ = 72 or slower) [5]

Fl. *p*

Ob. *p*

Cl. in Bb *p*

Bn. *p*

[10]

*mp* *mf* *p*

*mp* *mf* *p*

*mf* *p*

*mp* *mf* *p*

[15]

*p* *più p* *più p*

\*"Sneak entrances" throughout this movement.

ex. 6-3a Elliott Carter, *Eight Etudes and a Fantasy*, Etude no. 3



Intensely (♩ = 126)

5

FL. *p* *ff* *mf* *p*

Ob. *p* *ff* *f* *mf* *mf*

Cl. in Bb *p* *ff* *f* *mf* *p*

Bsn. *ff* *mf*

10

*f* *pp* *pp* *mf*

*f* *pp* *mf* *pp* *mf* *pp*

*pp* *mf* *pp* *mf* *pp*

*f* *pp* *mf* *pp* *mf* *pp* *mf*

15

*pp* *mf* *pp* *f* *pp*

*mf* *pp* *mf*

*f* *pp* *mf* *pp* *f* *p*

*pp* *mf* *pp* *f* *p* *f*

ex. 6-3b Elliott Carter, *Eight Etudes and a Fantasy*, Etude no. 7 (beginning)

The concluding Fantasy (written later, not at the blackboard) is a fugue on a very long subject combining motives from four of the Etudes. Over its course it “modulates” from the tempo of the first etude to that of the seventh, then the second, and so on, motivic elements of the relevant etude coming to the fore as episodes at each tempo station. At various points the subject is heard in stretto at two tempos simultaneously, their relationship translated into conventionally notated note-lengths. In the second measure of Ex. 6-4, the bassoon plays the opening of the subject at a metronome rate of [quarter] = 84, the tempo of Etude No. 1, against a statement in the flute that proceeds in even notes of seven sixteenths’ duration. The flute is thus playing in a durational ratio of 7:4 vis-à-vis the bassoon. Another way of putting this would be that the flute is playing at a metronomic beat rate of 48, since  $(7:4) \times 12 = 84:48$ .

The source of this playful superimposition of tempi is, of course, the music of Ives: e.g. the contest of two bands at the middle of “Putnam’s Camp” from *Three Places in New England*. Carter has reestablished contact with Ives’s example, but only after having extended it to a more arcane ratio (Ives’s being a simple 3:2) and abstracting it from its programmatic context. Another, more dynamic sort of superimposition comes at the end of the Fantasy, where the subject is accelerated to the point where it disappears into the blur of a trill while at the same time it is played as a cantus firmus in longer note-values than ever. Each of the instruments participates at various points in both processes.

The timpani studies, which were revised and augmented by an additional pair for publication in 1966 (as *Eight Pieces for Four Timpani*), continue the rhythmic explorations of the woodwind Fantasy, with particular emphasis on the technique of proportional, exactly calibrated tempo “modulation.” The most sophisticated and thoroughgoing example of it comes in the middle of the seventh piece, called “Canaries” (Ex. 6-5). The title, which may seem surprising in a piece for timpani (and was probably chosen with that surprise in mind), refers not to household warblers but rather to a fast jig-like dance, all leaping and stamping, that was imported to Spain from the Canary Islands in the sixteenth century.

A steady pulse of dotted quarters is established in the third measure of Ex. 6-5. It crosscuts the notated quarter-note pulse, set at the metronome rate of MM96. The relationship between a dotted quarter and a quarter is the hemiola proportion, 3:2. Therefore the metronome speed that would correspond to the dotted-quarter pulse is of 96, or MM64. That shift takes place in m. 6 of the example, and is reinforced by doubling: the timpanist plays the renoted pulse with both hands, using all four drums. The whole passage that follows pits the constant pulse in the timpanist's left hand against a constantly accelerating pulse in the right.

First (m. 8) the right hand reverts to the old quarter note, at  $3/2$  times the speed of the dotted quarter in the left. In m. 9 the parenthetical accents imply a pulse duration such that two quarters = of the dotted quarter at MM64, or twice the original quarter at MM96, either way implying a pulse of MM96 or MM48. At m. 10 that half-note pulse is filled with three triplet quarters: the right hand has accelerated once again by a hemiola ratio of 3:2. This time the pulse in the right hand is  $3 \times 48$  or MM144, while the left hand is still beating at a rate of MM64. The proportion 144:64 reduces to 9:4, which is why the notation in m. 10 suddenly looks complicated. Notated in terms of the new right-hand pulse, the old left-hand pulse equals 9 sixteenth notes under a triplet bracket. Only the visual appearance of the notation (and the wordy descriptive prose that is now tracking it) are complicated, however; to the ear, two successive hemiola proportions— $(3:2) \times (3:2) = 9:4$ —are easy to follow.

The notation is eased in m. 11, when the triplet brackets are removed, and the new pulse is specified instead by the metronome setting. There is no audible difference between m. 10 and m. 11, except that now the right hand is once again preparing for a hemiola proportion, grouping its quarters by twos. The new implied half-note pulse, as Carter's setting specifies, is MM72. When it is filled by a triplet, as happens in m. 12, the triplet quarter will run at a spiffy MM216. Since  $216:64$  reduces to  $27:8$ , or  $(3:2) \times (3:2) \times (3:2)$ , the old pulse of MM64, still plodding along in the left hand, must now be represented as a duration of twenty-seven thirty-second notes against the right hand's quarter. At m. 17 yet another hemiola proportion is prepared, by grouping the new quarter pulse by two (implying a pulse of MM108) and then dividing the implied half note into a triplet (each quarter now zipping by at MM324!). The new notation of the old pulse now becomes even more finicky, since the notation has followed the right hand through four hemiolas, and the left-hand duration must now be represented as the equivalent of eighty-one sixty-fourth notes, since  $(324:64) \div 4 = 81:16$ .

The image displays a musical score for the middle section of "Canaries" from Elliott Carter's *Eight Pieces for Four Timpani*. The score is written for a single timpani part and is divided into five systems, each beginning with a measure number (7, 11, 16, 21) and a circled letter (N, R, C, N, C). The notation is highly complex, featuring numerous triplets, hemiolas, and dynamic markings such as *p*, *mf*, *f*, *mp*, *poco a poco cresc.*, *cresc.*, and *ff*. The tempo markings include  $\text{♩} = 96$ ,  $\text{♩} = 64$ ,  $\text{♩} = 144$ ,  $\text{♩} = 72$ ,  $\text{♩} = 108$ , and  $\text{♩} = 162$ . The score also includes performance instructions like "trm" (trill), "sempre" (both for R.H. and L.H.), and "L.H. only". The notation uses various symbols like (>) for accents and (<math>\text{♩}</math>) for note values, and includes complex rhythmic groupings and ties.

ex. 6-5 Elliott Carter, *Eight Pieces for Four Timpani*, "Canaries," middle section

At this point the limit of practicable speed has been reached by the timpanist's right hand, and so the pattern of successive hemiolas is broken. The two hands begin alternating in a duple pattern at the rate of the fastest triplets, implying a quarter note pulse that is half of MM324 (= MM162, as notated in m. 24). The notation becomes simple again, but not because the music has become more simple. The complications in the notation paradoxically arose in connection with the simplest element in the music: the steady, absolutely fixed and immutable left-hand pulse.

The only way to make the relationships between the constant pulse and the changing pulse metronomically exact was to continually readjust the notation to show the changes, leaving the constant element to adapt. (The weird notation of the Adagio from the Double Concerto in Ex. 6-2 is a more complicated instance of the same principle.) Timpanists performing the piece do not actually have to count durations of twenty-seven thirty-seconds or eighty-one sixty-fourths. All they need to do is keep their left hand swinging at a constant rate and concentrate on the changing patterns in the right. Woodwind and brass players in the Double Concerto's Adagio face a similar problem.

Although the main preoccupation (or compositional "problem") in "Canaries" is obviously rhythmic, the pitches are also organized in a way that reflects preoccupation with "the formation of ideas with minimal material," and that became equally characteristic of Carter's music. From the set of four pitch-classes to which the timpani are

tuned (EBC# F, reading its actual pitches from the bottom up), every interval from the semitone to the tritone can be extracted, which means that every interval there is can be extracted from the given tetrachord, since all other intervals are either inversions or compounds of the basic six (sometimes called "interval classes"). Such "all interval tetrachords," as they are now called in the theoretical literature, are the most economical possible way of expressing (or implying) the full range of intervallic possibilities. There are exactly two such tetrachords. The one Carter used in "Canaries" can be represented in closest spacing as /0 1 4 6/ reading up or down (in this case down from F). The other is /0 1 3 7/. All-interval tetrachords play an increasingly prominent role in Carter's music from this point on, for reasons that will later emerge more fully.

## Notes:

- (7) Elliott Carter, "Once Again Swing; Also 'American Music,'" *Modern Music*, January 1939; in Else Stone and Kurt Stone, *The Writings of Elliott Carter* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), p. 46.
- (8) David Schiff, *The Music of Elliott Carter* (London: Eulenburg Books, 1983), p. 115.
- (9) Elliott Carter, "The Case of Mr. Ives," *Modern Music*, March 1939; *The Writings of Elliott Carter*, p. 51.
- (10) Richard Franko Goldman, "Current Chronicle," *Musical Quarterly* XXXVII (1951): 83–84.
- (11) Elliott Carter, "Music and the Time Screen," in *Current Thought in Musicology*, ed. John W. Grubbs (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976), p. 67.
- (12) *Ibid.*

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Carter: Breakthrough works

## THEORY: THE TIME SCREEN

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 6 Standoff (II)

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

Tempo modulation, often called “metrical modulation” (a misnomer coined by Goldman in his article of 1951), is Carter's trademark innovation, although (as he has pointed out to more than one interviewer)

there is nothing new about [it] but the name. To limit brief mention of its derivations to notated Western music: it is implicit in the rhythmic procedures of late fourteenth-century French music, as it is in music of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that uses hemiola and other ways of alternating meters, especially duple and triple. From then on, since early sets of variations like those of Byrd and Bull started a tradition of establishing tempo relationships between movements, tempo modulation began to relate movements of one piece together, as can be seen in many works of Beethoven, not only in the variations of Op. 111, but in many places where *doppio movimento* and other terms are used to delineate [exact] tempo relationships. In fact, at that very time, the metronome was invented, which establishes relationships between all tempi. In our time, Stravinsky, following Satie, perhaps, wrote a few works around 1920 whose movements were closely linked by a very narrow range of tempo relationships, and much later Webern did the same.<sup>13</sup>

Carter has also listed various non-Western traditions—Indian, Arabic, Balinese, and West African—as sources of his rhythmic techniques, as well as “jazz of the thirties and forties that combined free improvisation with strict time.” The sheer cited range calls for comment, not so much because it flaunts erudition, but because it suggests an important difference between mid-twentieth-century composers and those who lived before the widespread dissemination of sound recordings. Thanks to records, which Carter explicitly acknowledged as the source of his knowledge of African music, but which were probably also a gateway to early Western music (just then being commercially recorded on an unprecedented scale), a composer could live, as Henry Cowell once put it, “in the whole world of music” in a way that could never previously have been imagined.

Like Carter, many composers with this sort of access to such a diversity of musics began to think newly of themselves as universalists or omnibus synthesizers. It gave them a much more immediate contact with exotic musics of all kinds, and a newly immediate sense of themselves as living in history, not only as direct recipients of a particular tradition, but as heirs to the sum total of musical culture. For some, that realization brought with it a vastly magnified consciousness of heritage and obligation. It gave Carter a sense of responsibility toward music and its development, and a new sense of purpose. Or that, at least, is the way he has described his development to Allen Edwards, a sort of Boswell who interviewed him at length and fashioned a widely-read book, *Flawed Words and Stubborn Sounds*, out of Carter's responses. Carter's account of his shift in musical interests has an important bearing on the social and historical issues that this chapter and the previous one jointly address.

Carter has dated the change to the year 1944, which, coincidentally or not, was the year in which his *Holiday Overture*, his most overtly “populist” composition, was rejected for performance by Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony, despite Copland's enthusiastic sponsorship. In that year, he told his interlocutor,

I suddenly realized that, at least in my own education, people had always been concerned only with this or that peculiar local rhythmic combination or sound-texture or novel harmony and had forgotten that the really interesting thing about music is the time of it—the way it all goes along. Moreover, it struck me that, despite the newness and variety of the post-tonal musical vocabulary, most modern pieces generally “went along” in an all-too-uniform way on their higher architectonic levels. That is, it seemed to me that, while we had heard every imaginable kind of harmonic and timbral combination, and while there had been a degree of rhythmic innovation on the *local* level in the music of Stravinsky, Bartók, Varèse, and Ives particularly, nonetheless the way all this went together at the next higher and succeeding higher rhythmic levels remained in the orbit of what had begun to seem to me the rather limited rhythmic routine of previous Western music. This fact began to bother me enough so that I tried to think in larger-scale time-continuities of a kind that would be still convincing and yet at the same time *new* in a way commensurate with, and appropriate to, the richness of the modern musical vocabulary.<sup>14</sup>

“What contemporary music needs,” he went on,

is not just raw materials of every kind but a way of relating these—of having them evolve during the course of a work in a sharply meaningful way; that is, what is needed is never just a string of “interesting passages,” but works whose central interest is constituted by the way everything that happens in them happens *as* and *when* it does in relation to everything else. I feel very strongly about this, just because ever since 1944 I have realized that ultimately the matter of musical time is vastly more important than the particulars or the novelty of the musical vocabulary, and that the morphological elements of any music owe their musical effect almost entirely to their specific “placing” in the musical time-continuity.<sup>15</sup>

One could hardly express a fuller commitment to the idea of research and development as the composer's primary task. One's entire responsibility as an artist, as Carter here envisions it, is to maintain the pace of technical innovation set by one's predecessors, to make sure that it applies equally to all musical parameters, and direct its course toward the most productive possible historical evolution. Above all, one must “prioritize” one's goals. Carter is very critical of the work of many if not most of his contemporaries:

It seems to me that many of the works of the Darmstadt school of composers have suffered greatly from the attempt to apply certain mistaken “philosophic conceptions” of time to music itself, though it is clear that the attractiveness of these conceptions about, say, the “interchangeability of musical moments” [a reference to Stockhausen] has its roots in the kind of visually- and spatially-derived mechanistic thinking that originally produced total serialism [a reference to Boulez, and, possibly, to Babbitt as well] and was unconcerned from the outset with the problem of time-continuity and of producing feelings of tension and release and therefore of musical motion in the listener, but dealt rather with unusualness of aural effect, thus reducing music to mere physical sound.<sup>16</sup>

But he shares their commitment to innovation as a primary obligation mandated by history, whatever the consequences may be in terms of the popularity or comprehensibility of the result outside (or even inside) the boundaries of the profession. Carter outlined his own “philosophic conceptions” in an essay called “Music and the Time Screen,” which he delivered as a lecture at the University of Texas in 1971 and later published. The discussion recalls somewhat the second lecture in Stravinsky's *Poetics of Music*, with its little dissertation—borrowed from Pierre Souvchinsky, who had borrowed it from Henri Bergson—on the distinction between ontological (or objective) time, ticked off by a clock, and psychological (or subjective) time, meaning time as we humanly perceive it.

The difference is that where Stravinsky had been content to present the pair as a bald and (for music) value-laden contrast, ontological correlating with “classic” (good) and psychological with “romantic” (bad) musical habits, Carter sees music as deriving its value from its capacity to mediate between the two aspects of time. He

adopts as his model a celebrated philosophical discussion of music in Susanne Langer's esthetic treatise *Feeling and Form* (1953). Time is, on the one hand, the experience of passage, and, on the other, the experience of change. Passage is measured by change, which in turn (here Carter quotes Langer; the ellipses are his):

is measured by contrasting two states of an instrument, whether that instrument be the sun in various positions, or the hand on a dial at successive locations, or a parade of monotonous similar events like ticks or clashes, "counted," i.e. differentiated, by being correlated with a series of distinct numbers .... "Change" is not itself something represented; it is implicitly given through the contrast of different "states" themselves unchanging.

The time concept which emerges from such mensuration is something far removed from time as we know it in direct experience, which is essentially *passage*, or the sense of transience .... But the experience of time is anything but simple. It involves more properties than "length," or interval between selected moments; for its passages have also what I can only call, metaphorically, *volume*. Subjectively, a unit of time may be great or small as well as long or short. It is this voluminousness of the direct experience of passage, that makes it ... indivisible. But even its volume is not simple; for it is filled with its own characteristic forms, otherwise it could not be observed and appreciated .... The primary image of music is the sonorous image of passage, abstracted from actuality to become free and plastic and entirely perceptible.<sup>17</sup>

The deliberate representation of that sonorous image of existence as temporal, Carter asserted, was what the task of all music should be, and what the task of *his* music, uniquely, actually was. By analogy with Langer's "contrasting states," Carter sought ways of combining and contrasting aspects of time—of "passage" or unfolding—within a single texture. For example: the first movement of Carter's Cello Sonata (written last) combines what in his essay he calls "chronometric" time (that is, regular isochrony or equal pulses) in the piano against "chrono-ametric" time (irregular mixtures of values producing a rubato effect) in the cello (Ex. 6-6).



(Tempo giusto)  
Moderato (♩ = 112)

Violoncello

Piano

The first system of the musical score features a Violoncello part on a single bass staff and a Piano part on a grand staff (treble and bass staves). The Violoncello part is mostly silent, with a few notes in the final measure. The Piano part is more active, starting with a *mf* dynamic, moving to *ff* and then *mf*. It includes a *f* dynamic in the second measure and a *p* dynamic in the third measure, with the word "(un" written below the final note. There are various musical markings such as slurs, accents, and hairpins throughout the system.

5

*espressivo-quasi rubato*

*v*

*mp cantabile*

5

*poco incisivo*)

*staccato sempre*

ex. 6-6 Elliott Carter, Cello Sonata, I, opening

To illustrate “metric modulation” in “Music and the Time Screen,” Carter selected the passage from “Canaries” for timpani given in Ex. 6-5, and commented that “to the listener, this passage should sound as if the left hand keeps up a steady beat throughout the passage, not participating in the modulations.”<sup>18</sup> In this way, he said, he sought to incorporate elements of both kinds of time experience, as Stravinsky had dichotomized them: “pure duration” as against the distortions of our time sense wrought by “expectation, anxiety, sorrow, suffering, fear, contemplation, pleasure, all of which could not be grasped if there were not a primary sensation of ‘real’ or ‘ontological’ time.”<sup>19</sup> As Carter developed these ideas in his music of the 1950s and 1960s, “the primary questions” he sought to answer in his work as a composer were these: “How are events presented, carried on, and accompanied? What kind of changes can previously presented events undergo while maintaining some element of identity? and, How can all this be used to express compelling aspects of experience to the listener?”<sup>20</sup> His attempts to answer them led him to what he called

a special dimension of time, that of “multiple perspective” in which various contrasting characters are presented simultaneously—as was occasionally done in opera, for example, in the ballroom scene from *Don Giovanni*, or in the finale of *Aïda*. Double and sometimes manifold character simultaneities, of course, present, as our human experience often does, certain emotionally charged events as seen in the context of others, producing often a kind of irony, which I am particularly interested in. In doing this so frequently, and by leading into and away from such moments in what seemed to me telling ways, I have, I think, been trying to make moments of music as rich in reference as I could and to do something that can be done only in music and yet that has rarely been achieved except in opera.<sup>21</sup>

Eventually, Carter began to experiment with ways of allowing the components of his multiple perspectives to develop independently rather than present statically contrasting characters. This made for situations—simultaneous accelerandos and ritardandos combined with regular beating, for example, as found in the Double Concert—that were almost impossible to notate exactly, giving the music the exceedingly forbidding visual appearance that can mislead score-readers even as it conveys essential information to performers. That begins to hint at some of the problems that Carter's music, despite its “minimal” materials and its ingenuous expressive aims, has created not only for listeners but even for professional analysts, and to suggest why his music, like the total serialism he despises, has acquired a reputation for intellectual abstraction and perceptual opacity. The interesting, historically significant point is that such a reputation did nothing to hinder, and much to facilitate, Carter's belated but inexorable progress to eminence, and even preeminence, among the composers of his generation.

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## Notes:

(13) Allen Edwards, *Flawed Words and Stubborn Sounds: A Conversation with Elliott Carter* (New York: Norton, 1971), pp. 91–92n.

(14) *Ibid.* pp. 90–91.

(15) *Ibid.* p. 92.

(16) *Ibid.* pp. 93–94.

(17) Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (1953); quoted in Carter, “Music and the Time Screen,” p. 66.

(18) Carter, “Music and the Time Screen,” p. 70.

(19) *Ibid.* p. 68.

(20) *Ibid.* pp. 73–74.

(21) *Ibid.* p. 77.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

See also from Grove Music Online

Elliott Carter

String quartet: 1940–75

Charles Ives

## PRACTICE: THE FIRST QUARTET

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 6 Standoff (II)

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

The first composition in which Carter implemented the new musical resources he had developed in the late 1940s at full strength, and over the sustained time span of a “major” work, was his First String Quartet, composed between the fall of 1950 and the spring of 1951 while living on a Guggenheim Fellowship in the lower Sonoran Desert near Tucson, Arizona. That bare biographical fact has done much to encourage Carter’s “hermetic” image—deserts, after all, are where hermits live. But Carter himself has knowingly contributed to the mythology surrounding the Quartet. Earlier, he confessed, he had allowed “the desire to remain within the realm of the performable and auditorily distinguishable divisions of time” to restrain his imaginative speculations. But now, “there were so many emotional and expressive experiences that I kept having, and so many notions of processes and continuities, especially musical ones—fragments I could find no ways to use in my compositions—that I decided to leave my usual New York activities to seek the undisturbed quiet to work these out.”<sup>22</sup>

Many writers have resorted to undisguised religious imagery when writing about the gestation of the First Quartet: a “monastic” seclusion, a “conversion,” following which “a new composer emerged,” in David Schiff’s frankly hagiographical account, “uncompromising and visionary.”<sup>23</sup> But as we know all too well, the word “uncompromising” had social and political as well as religious connotations in the context of the cold war, and Carter corroborated them fully when he told Allen Edwards that the Quartet was his way of “say [ing] to hell with the public and with the performers too.”<sup>24</sup> From now on he would identify with the romantic, asocial concept of artistry in its priestliest form, as defined for the twentieth century in the passage from the French theologian Jacques Maritain that stands at the head of the previous chapter. He was now an *artifex*, as unconcerned with edifying the public as he was with shocking it. Henceforth his reference would be to his art alone, and to its history—both the history he had inherited and the history he would make.

The First Quartet is a monumentally engineered construction of multiple perspectives, each of its four movements embodying the idea in a different way. So intent was Carter on the centrality of process over state as the basis of his musical conceptions that he placed the “movement breaks” (or breaks for relaxation) not between the movements but within the second and the fourth movements. All actual progressions between movements are executed without break, by means of “tempo modulation.” The Quartet thus displays its four structural divisions in three temporal spans— [(1 → 2) (2 → 4) (→ 4)]—already a kind of polyrhythm.

The first movement, “Fantasia,” is a study in fixed vs. fluid tempi like Ex. 6-6, but on a vast scale. A number of themes, each associated with a certain tempo (that is an “absolute” or “ontological” clock-measured beat-duration) are put through a series of polyrhythmic (or “polytemporal”) montages, each linked with the next by taking one of the tempos as a constant, just as a simple harmonic modulation is a linking of tonalities through a pivot chord, a harmony common to both keys (see Ex. 6-7). The rhapsodic opening solo for the cello is cast in a sort of composed rubato like the beginning of the solo part in Ex. 6-6: diverse note values are mixed together, while accents and long notes are often placed at variance with the notated beat. That rhythmic freedom is

contradicted by the regularity of the violin pizzicatos that enter in m. 12, corresponding in its strict sequence of dotted eighths with the regularity of the piano part in Ex. 6-6.

The violin's equal (or isochronous) beats set up the movement's first steady tempo tread. Each note being the value of the notated beat, the violin's implied tempo ( of  $MM7\ 2$ ) is  $MM96$ . That is the first measured acceleration, or tempo modulation. The next acceleration is led by the cello, which in m. 14 begins breaking up the  $MM7\ 2$  beat into quintuplets. Under the quintuplet brace a sixteenth note goes at  $5 \times MM7\ 2$ , or  $MM360$ . At m. 17, the same notes are grouped by threes rather than fives; as the composer notes, the resulting implied dotted-quarter beat is now  $MM360 \div 3$ , or  $MM120$ . The cello actually begins moving in dotted quarters in m. 20, and two measures later that value is equated with a new quarter-note pulse at  $MM120$ . That is the second measured acceleration, once again by an increment of  $MM24$ .

At this point (m. 22) the second violin reenters with the same music as in m. 12, transposed up an octave. This time its durations are notated as quarters tied to sixteenths (= five sixteenths, of the notated beat) rather than dotted eighths (= three sixteenths, of the notated beat). But the absolute duration or tempo of the theme is identical on its two appearances, since of  $MM7\ 2$  is the same as of  $MM120$ : both equal  $MM96$  as in m. 12. The process of successive tempo montages linked by tempo modulations continues throughout the movement.

Maestoso  $\text{♩} = 72$

Vln. I  
Vln. II  
Vla.  
Vc.

10

*Pizz.*  
*f* *arabé, marc.* *p* *f*

15  $\text{♩} = 72$   $\text{♩} = 120$

20  $\text{♩} = 120$  ( $\text{♩} = 120$ ) *mp* tranquillo  
 (*pizz.*) *f marc.*

25 *mf* *f marc., détaché* *mf sub.* *(poco) cresc.*

*mf* *in fuori* *meno. f* *f sost. e cant.*

ex. 6-7 Elliott Carter, String Quartet no. 1, I, mm. 1–29

The passage beginning at m. 22 is the first in which the entire quartet takes part. Its texture—four separate lines, all radically differentiated in rhythm and, usually, in character—is typical. All the instruments play regular beat-sequences. The cello's regular pulse at MM120 forms the basis of the notation. The viola, entering at m. 25 (past the end of Ex. 6-7), plays three notes to the cello's two; its implied tempo is MM120, or MM180. The second violin, as noted, continues at a rate of MM96. The first violin, although it plays quietly, is sufficiently differentiated from the rest of the texture by its legato articulation to take on the role of soloist, performing a melody that will often recur. Its first four notes are all times the length of the notated beat; hence it moves at an implied tempo of MM120, or MM36 (see Ex. 6-8a for a simpler notation), exactly half the speed of the original marked tempo.



The cello, reentering at m. 27, displaces the first violin in the foreground, as Carter marks explicitly. It plays a six-note theme in values notated as halves tied to eighths, or times the rate of the notated beat. Its metronome pulse, therefore, is MM120, or MM48. It is given a simpler notation in Ex. 6-8b. Its source is shown in Ex. 6-8c, for it is a quotation of the opening phrase of Ives's First Violin Sonata, a score Ives had sent Carter in manuscript photostat in 1928. Quoting it was an homage to the man whose rhythmic explorations had sparked Carter's own, and perhaps also an act of atonement for the slight delivered in 1939.



ex. 6-8a Renotations from Elliott Carter, String Quartet no. 1, I, first violin at m. 22



ex. 6-8b Renotations from Elliott Carter, String Quartet no. 1, I, cello at m. 27



ex. 6-8c Charles Ives, Violin Sonata no. 1, mm. 1–2 (piano)

Once the cello has begun the Ives quotation, incidentally, none of the instruments is actually playing at the rate of the notated pulse, but all are coordinating their playing with it as a way of keeping together. That is a very common situation in the Quartet. As Carter implied in conversation with Edwards, it is one that is also encountered in a good deal of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century “mensural” music, and very little in between. Carter's rhythmic idiom, beginning with the First Quartet, could thus be termed a modernized and expanded mensural system, with all that the term implies—namely, that notated durations no longer have inherent metrical significance but denote only spans of time that can be freely manipulated and interrelated.

The image displays a musical score for Elliott Carter's String Quartet no. 1, I, mm. 197-204. The score is in 3/8 time and features complex rhythmic patterns. It includes staves for Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello/Double Bass. The score is marked with dynamics such as *f*, *marc. e sost.*, and *ff*, and includes tempo markings like 'V' and '200'. The first system shows measures 197-200, and the second system shows measures 201-204. The score is characterized by dense, overlapping textures and complex rhythmic relationships.

ex. 6-9 Elliott Carter, String Quartet no. 1, I, mm. 197–204

Another spot that resembles the textures of late-medieval music (and that could actually be notated more easily using fifteenth-century notation) is the stretto that begins in the cello and viola at m. 197 (Ex. 6-9). Every instrument as it enters plays at a rate exactly that of the instrument directly beneath it in the score. It is in effect a multiple projection of the successive hemiolas in “Canaries” (Ex. 6-5): the viola plays three dotted quarters against a pair of the cello's nine-sixteenth-note durations, the second violin plays three quarters against a pair of the viola's dotted quarters, and the first violin plays a triplet to each pair of quarters in the second violin. In mm. 201–203, all instruments play even notes in a proportion of 27 : 18 : 12 : 8; the outer numbers reduce to  $3^3 : 2^3$ , a relationship that would have gladdened the heart of Philippe de Vitry, the venerable theorist of the “Ars Nova”; compare a famous spot (well, famous among musicologists) from Du Fay's *Missa L'Homme Armé*, ca. 1465 (Ex. 6-10).

Ge - ni - tum, non fa - ctum, con - sub - stan -

Ge - ni - tum, non fa - ctum,

re - ro. Ge -

Ge - ni - tum, non fa - ctum,

ti - a - lem pa - tri! per quem

con - sub - stan - ti - a - lem

ni - rum,

con - sub - stan - ti - a - lem

o - mni a fa -

pa - tri! per quem o - mni - a fa -

non fa -

pa - tri! per quem o - mni -

The image shows a musical score for the first quartet of Guillaume Du Fay's *Missa L'Homme Armé*, Credo, "Genitum non factum est". The score is in 3/4 time and features four staves: soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. The lyrics are: "a - fa - cta sunt. Qui pro - ctum. Qui pro -". The score includes triplets and a fermata over the first staff.

ex. 6-10 Guillaume Du Fay, *Missa L'Homme Armé*, Credo, "Genitum non factum est"

The passage of successive "prolongations" at m. 197 epitomizes the generally accelerating course that leads the first movement into the second, marked *Allegro scorrevole* (fast and flowing), a favorite Carter designation. We can chart the transition by reentering the movement at m. 282, where a sort of recapitulation begins. Themes (though not keys, of which there are no unequivocal examples) begin coming back, starting with a reprise, in the viola, of the Ives quotation, embedded this time in a texture that is notated using a quarter-note pulse of MM160.

The viola performs a composed accelerando: the first note of the Ives quotation lasts seventeen eighths, the second fifteen, the third twelve, the fourth just a little under ten. But starting with the F# in m. 293, the viola settles into a steady tempo. That note lasts five half notes where the half note is set at MM120. A series of notes that length would move at of MM120, or MM24. But starting in m. 297, the viola begins moving at twice that rate, with notes lasting five eighths under a new metronome setting in which the half-note (=four eighths) is set at MM60. Since MM60 equals MM48, it turns out that the viola has regained the exact original tempo of the "Ives" theme, in preparation for the huge polyrhythmic montage at mm. 312–350, a climactically expanded recapitulation of the original montage in mm. 22–30. Its beginning is shown in Ex. 6-11.

The image shows a musical score for Violin II, consisting of five staves. The top staff is a standard treble clef staff with a key signature of one flat and a 4/4 time signature. It contains a melodic line with dynamic markings *mf* and *p*, and three measures of slurs marked with the letter 'S'. The second staff is labeled 'Vln. II alternate notation' and features a complex rhythmic pattern with slurs and the marking *espr.*. The third staff is also in treble clef with a tempo marking '(♩=135)' and *espr.*. The fourth staff is in bass clef with a *p* dynamic marking. The fifth staff is in bass clef with a *mf* dynamic marking and a *mp* dynamic marking. The score is divided into four measures by vertical bar lines.

ex. 6-11 Elliott Carter, String Quartet no. 1, I, mm. 312–23

The cello here recapitulates the viola's music at m. 25, and at exactly the same tempo, MM180 (thrice MM60). The first violin recapitulates a theme first heard in the second violin at m. 41, and again at the same tempo, MM300 ( $5 \times \text{MM60}$ ). The second violin recapitulates a lyrical melody that was first heard in the viola at m. 70 ff, and again (in simpler notation) in the first violin at m. 112 ff. (The notation at m. 112 is simpler because the metronome pulse (MM135) coincides there with the violin's quarter note.) At m. 312 the relationship between the second violin's tempo and the metronomic pulse is so complicated that Carter supplied an alternative notation to clarify it, but a little computation will show that it is the same tempo as before. Each note now takes four eighths where a group of nine eighths fills the time of a measure at MM60. Each note, therefore, is of a measure, which means that the tune moves at a rate of MM60, or MM135.

The tempi here are so radically differentiated in beat length that—provided the Quartet is well enough performed so that the players are not emphasizing their occasional coincident pulses for the sake of ensemble—one can really sense a texture made up of “multiple perspectives,” all coordinated to a single conceptual pulse but

perceptually independent of it. It is a heady sensation, likened by Virgil Thomson after the first performance to “four intricately integrated solos all going on at the same time,” and well justifying Thomson’s unusually enthusiastic description of the Quartet as being “complex of texture, delicious in sound, richly expressive and in every way grand.”<sup>25</sup>

One of the things that made the Quartet seem both grand and richly expressive was its deployment of large, dramatic gestures. As the Fantasia’s concluding montage proceeds, it also gradually ascends in pitch. By m. 345 all four instruments are sawing away in their highest registers; the breakthrough into the *Allegro scorrevole* — led by the second violin, whose MM135 becomes the uniform fast tempo of the ensemble — can be heard as the inevitable result of applying further pressure to a situation already at the limit of tension. The speed of the second movement is exactly that of the fastest moment in the first (m. 105).

Thematic material for the second movement is drawn entirely from the seven-note motif first heard in violin I in m. 356, and again immediately afterward, inverted and split between the two violins in m. 357 (Ex. 6-12a). As Ex. 6-12b shows, this motif contains both all-interval tetrachords, thus providing a link with the harmonic idiom of the first movement, many of whose themes and local harmonies (like the first four-part chord in the Quartet, m. 5) are similarly constructed. Later in the second movement, when a homophonic or chorale-like texture briefly succeeds the mosaic texture of the outset, the harmonies are again often constructed out of all-interval tetrachords (Ex. 6-12c). The last movement reaches its climax with a passage in which the 0 1 4 6/all-interval tetrachord acts as a universal harmonic regulator to govern the counterpoint (Ex. 6-12d).

ex. 6-12a Elliott Carter, String Quartet no. 1, violins at mm. 356–7

ex. 6-12b Elliott Carter, String Quartet no. 1, II, all-interval tetrachords in basic motive

## ex. 6-12c Elliott Carter, String Quartet no. 1, II, all-interval tetrachords as harmonies

## ex. 6-12d Elliott Carter, String Quartet no. 1, IV, all-interval tetrachord as contrapuntal regulator

The third movement, Adagio, is another homage to Ives. Like the latter's *The Unanswered Question*, the texture is split between a placid homorhythmic background (the two violins, muted) and an agonized, recitativelike music (viola and cello) in the foreground, all in all a very dramatic rendering of "multiple perspectives." The last movement, titled "Variations," returns to the complicated textures of the first, with even more strongly profiled and differentiated themes (if less complicated polyrhythms in combination), all put through a giddy process of constantly accelerating tempo modulation.

The most dramatic instance is the theme heard in the cello right after the second movement-break, sounding at first like a cantus firmus or passacaglia bass. It is subjected to the sort of motivic development promised by the movement's title, but it also recurs fourteen times in literal form, each time at a faster tempo than the last, until, having accelerated to a tempo twenty-one times that of its initial appearance it reaches the "vanishing point,"<sup>26</sup> as Carter described it, lapsing into a tremolo (Ex. 6-13).

By way of conclusion, the first violin plays a reminiscence of the cello's introductory solo from the beginning of the first movement. Accompanied at one point by the limit-tremolo in the other parts, it has a fraught quality reminiscent of the accompanied violin recitative in the last movement of Beethoven's Quartet in A minor, op. 132. It brings the whole composition full circle, providing a sort of tonal closure when the violin shoots up at the very end to the note E, with which the cello launched its solo at the other end of the Quartet.



The image displays a musical score for 'The First Quartet' by Johannes Brahms, arranged for a string quartet. The score is organized into 13 numbered measures, each with a specific tempo and dynamic marking. The instruments are Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), and Violoncello (Vc.).

- Measure 1:** Vc.  $\text{♩} = 120$ , *f*, (MM 24)
- Measure 2:** Vc.  $\text{♩} = 64$ , *mf*, (MM 25.6)
- Measure 3:** Vc.  $\text{♩} = 192$ , (MM 48)
- Measure 4:** Vc.  $\text{♩} = 144$  ( $\text{♩} = 96$ ), *pizz.*, *arco*, (MM 57.6)
- Measure 5:** Vln. I  $\text{♩} = 120$ , *ff*, (MM 60)
- Measure 6:** Vc.  $\text{♩} = 180$ , (MM 72)
- Measure 7:** Vla.  $\text{♩} = 45$ , (MM 90)
- Measure 8:** Vln. II  $\text{♩} = 120$ , (MM 120)
- Measure 9:** Vln. II  $\text{♩} = 121.5$ , (MM 182.25)
- Measure 10:** Vln. II  $\text{♩} = 72$ , (MM 216)
- Measure 11:** Vc.  $\text{♩} = 72$ , (MM 288)
- Measure 12:** Vln. I  $\text{♩} = 120$ , (MM 300)
- Measure 13:** Vln. I  $\text{♩} = 96$ , (MM 384)

14 ♩ = 84

MM 504

*ff* *p dim.* *pp*

*ff* *p dim.* *pp*

*ff* *mp* *mf* *p* *f marc.* *pp*

*ff* *p dim.* *pp*

(8)

*pp* (tremolo = MM 1008)

MM 504

*pp*

ex. 6-13 Progress of “passacaglia” theme in Elliott Carter, String Quartet no. 1, IV

But there is another significance to the “cyclic” ending. Carter has told interviewers that he was thinking of Jean Cocteau's surrealist film *The Blood of a Poet* (1933), in which “the entire dream-like action is framed by an interrupted slow-motion shot of a tall brick chimney in an empty lot being dynamited; just as the chimney begins to fall apart, the shot is broken off and the entire movie follows, after which the shot of the chimney is resumed at the point it left off, showing its disintegration in mid-air, and closing the film with its collapse on the ground.” The effect establishes a “difference between external time (measured by the falling chimney, or the cadenza) and internal dream time (the main body of the work)—the dream time lasting but a moment of external time but from the dreamer's point of view, a long stretch.”<sup>27</sup> Multiple perspectives, again, this time on the “global” or structurally unifying level.

## Notes:

(22) Liner note to Nonesuch Records H-71249 (1970).

(23) David Schiff, *The Music of Elliott Carter* (2nd ed.; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 55.

(24) Edwards, *Flawed Words*, p. 35.

(25) Virgil Thomson, "A Powerful Work," *New York Herald Tribune*, 5 May 1953; Thomson, *Music Reviewed 1940–1954* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 370.

(26) Elliott Carter, liner note to Columbia Records ML 5104 (1956).

(27) Nonesuch Records liner note (1970).

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

See also from Grove Music Online

Carter: Mature style

## RECEPTION

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 6 Standoff (II)

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

As the excerpts quoted from Virgil Thomson's review have already shown, Carter's quartet enjoyed a remarkable *succès d'estime*, or "reputation success." It taught him a lesson, as he has put it, "about my relationship with performers and audiences." For

as I wrote, an increasing number of musical difficulties arose for prospective performers and listeners, which the musical conception seemed to demand. I often wondered whether the quartet would ever have any performers or listeners. Yet within a few years of its composition it won an important prize and was played (always with a great deal of rehearsal) more than any work I had written up to that time. It even received praise from admired colleagues.<sup>28</sup>

The paradox not only taught him that he had been wrong to feel it his "professional and social responsibility to write interesting, direct, easily understood music;" it impelled or emboldened him to assert that any composer who followed such a mandate was wrong. On the contrary, he now maintained, "there is every reason to assume that if a composer has been well taught and has had experience (as was true of me in 1950), then his private judgment of comprehensibility and quality is what he must rely on if he is to communicate importantly."

The last word is of course the key, for it is the one that carries implications about value. Carter had indeed communicated importantly. A closer look at the reception his work has enjoyed will shed more light on what it was that made it seem so important just then, and to whom. At first, things went more or less as he expected. He had to wait more than a year before an ensemble—the Walden Quartet of the University of Illinois, to whom the work was eventually dedicated—signaled its willingness to tackle the score. The premiere took place on 26 February 1953 at Columbia University, during a festival of American music sponsored in part by the local public radio station, WNYC. The academic affiliation of the performing group, the academic venue, and the subsidized occasion were all indicative of the kind of marginal public existence an "advanced" composition could count on.

The prize to which Carter refers in the extract above was awarded later in 1953 by the jury of the *Counours international de quatuor* (International quartet-writing competition), held in Liège, Belgium, to which Carter had submitted the work (under the contest pseudonym Chronometros, "time-keeper"). The award guaranteed a performance by the Paris-based Parrenin Quartet, one of Europe's most prestigious ensembles specializing in contemporary music. Their performance, Carter's European debut, took place in Rome, in April 1954, at a music festival presented under the auspices of the Congress for Cultural Freedom. It was greeted with a euphoric review in *Encounter*, the Congress's English-language organ, by the British critic and publisher William Glock, who ran a sort of mini-Darmstadt for British musicians in the village of Dartington, where Carter was a frequent lecturer. (Later, as the powerful controller of music at the BBC, Glock would be one of Carter's most active promoters.) The performance and the review, as David Schiff observes, "immediately established Carter's European reputation."<sup>29</sup>

They did more than that. They plugged Carter's new direction into the politics of the cold war. The Congress for

Cultural Freedom was established in West Berlin in 1950, at the instigation of Ernst Reuter, the city's mayor, and with financial backing from the American Military Government (arranged by Melvin Lasky, an American trade unionist serving as a cultural attaché with the Army of Occupation and editor of its German-language monthly *Der Monat*). The organization's Secretary General or director was the composer Nicolas Nabokov (1903–78), a cousin of the more famous writer Vladimir Nabokov, and an old acquaintance of Carter's. (In 1940–41 they had between them made up the music staff at St. John's College, Annapolis.) Similar in origin to the Darmstadt Summer Courses, but with a wider purview and a far more glamorous cast of characters, the Congress was set up to showcase the arts and sciences of the “free world,” especially undertakings of a modernist, individualist variety that totalitarian powers rejected and harassed.

Unlike Darmstadt, the Congress had an overt and militant political agenda. Its fundamental purpose, in the words of the American philosopher Sidney Hook, one of its founding members, was to combat “the virus of neutralism that was spiritually disarming the West against Communist aggression.”<sup>30</sup> Its first major undertaking was a festival, *Masterpieces of the Twentieth Century*, a comprehensive exposition of music, painting, sculpture, and literature held in Paris in 1952, with Stravinsky as the guest of honor and nominal spokesman. The main musical tactic was the programming, in an effort to embarrass the Soviets, of several major works of Prokofiev and Shostakovich that were then under a post-Zhdanov ban in their own country. Their promotion as masterpieces, and their reception (by audiences, by some critics, and certainly by Stravinsky), had as much a political as an esthetic motivation.

The Congress was not very successful in its chief mission, that of containing the spread of Communist thinking among European intellectuals in the first decades of the cold war. And it was thoroughly discredited in the mid-1960s when it became known that it had been surreptitiously funded by the Central Intelligence Agency, the notorious bureau of the United States Government for espionage that had been created in 1947 as an instrument of cold-war policy. Sidney Hook complained that Nabokov's arts festivals, the Congress's most conspicuous achievements, were a waste of resources — mere “extravaganzas” and “junkets” without “the slightest perceptible effect in altering the climate of political opinion in Europe, especially in France,”<sup>31</sup> where (as in Italy) the Communist Party was strong in the early 1950s.

The arts, he even went on to assert, can never have such an impact. “Since art has flourished even under political tyrannies,” he wrote of the 1952 exposition, “there was nothing the festival presented that could not have been offered to the world under the aegis of an enlightened despotism.”<sup>32</sup> The fine arts, in his widely shared opinion, and especially the modern arts with their congenital tinge of elitism, were a poor advertisement for democracy. But if the Congress arts festivals, and their attendant publicity machine, had a negligible effect on cold-war politics as such, they nevertheless did have an important impact on the politics of the art world and on the fortunes of artists.

The Rome festival of 1954, at which Carter's quartet was unveiled to European acclaim, had a slightly different focus from its Paris predecessor. Limited to music, it was (in the words of the English art critic Herbert Read) “not a complacent look at the past, but a confident look into the future.”<sup>33</sup> Its purpose was to nominate, through showcase concerts and a series of prize competitions, a corps of standard-bearers for the Congress's highly politicized notion of cultural freedom, which in reality boiled down to sponsorship of the avant-garde, the type of art most obviously uncongenial to totalitarian taste.

That it was also uncongenial to “free world” public taste, and even to the personal taste of the festival organizers, was no object to its promotion. Nabokov, a disciple of the “neoclassical” Stravinsky (which made him a conservative figure in the postwar musical alignment), was nevertheless keenly aware of the propaganda value of promoting atonal and serial music, “which announced itself as doing away with natural hierarchies, as a liberation from previous laws about music's inner logic.”<sup>34</sup> Stravinsky, paid \$5,000 to attend, was once again the central figure, doubly valuable as a showpiece because of his recent “conversion” to serialism. His presence in Rome “signalled a major moment in the convergence of modernist tributaries in the ‘serialist orthodoxy,’” in

the words of Frances Stonor Saunders, the Congress for Cultural Freedom's leading chronicler. It was there that Stravinsky and Carter, who had met previously when Carter was a pupil of Nadia Boulanger, renewed their acquaintance, but now as colleagues engaged in a modernist resurgence.

Carter, not a serialist but often taken for one, was a major beneficiary of the pattern of patronage established by the Congress festivals. (At the 1960 Fromm-sponsored Princeton Seminar in Advanced Musical Studies, Carter was coy about his relationship to serialism; when asked whether he used the twelve-tone system he replied, "Some critics have said that I do, but since I have never analyzed my works from this point of view, I cannot say."<sup>35</sup>) That pattern spread to corporate and institutional America through the decade of the 1950s, at first primarily through the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations (both of which had been strong financial backers of the Congress for Cultural Freedom), creating an unprecedented infrastructure of prestige to support and encourage advanced art and its creators.

Institutional, critical, and corporate support made it possible for such artists (especially those blessed like Carter with independent sources of income) to have outstandingly successful public careers in the virtual absence of an audience: a unique and perhaps never to be repeated phenomenon. Indeed in some cases, notably Carter's, the degree of professional and media recognition approached an inverse proportion to the size of the audience; as the latter shrank, performances, recordings, publicity, and prizes mounted. Commissions mounted, too, since a Carter premiere guaranteed wide and auspicious coverage. But it was not just the confluence of money and snobbery (to recall Britten's strictures) that brought this development about. There was a strong component of politics as well—a politics with which few artists in the West were then inclined to differ.

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## Notes:

(28) *Ibid.*

(29) Schiff, *The Music of Elliott Carter* (1983), p. 152.

(30) Sidney Hook, *Out of Step* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1988), p. 440.

(31) *Ibid.*, p. 445.

(32) *Ibid.*, p. 446.

(33) Quoted in Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 2000), p. 221.

(34) Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, p. 223.

(35) Elliott Carter, "Shop Talk by an American Composer," in *Problems of Modern Music*, ed. P. H. Lang (New York: Norton, 1962), p. 58.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Elliott Carter

String quartet: 1940–75

## A WHOLLY DISINTERESTED ART?

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 6 Standoff (II)

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

Carter's next major work after the First Quartet was Variations for Orchestra, composed between 1953 and 1955 on commission from the Louisville Orchestra. It took the quartet's tempo modulation technique a step further, applying it not only to discrete proportional relationships (comparable to gear shifts), but to gradually executed accelerandos and ritardandos as well. This technical refinement, and a great many others, went into the Second Quartet (1959), the style of which was much influenced by Carter's European success and the respect he now enjoyed among the younger composers there (as well as his generational peers, like Luigi Dallapiccola and Goffredo Petrassi, the senior Italian serialists, who heard the First Quartet at its Rome premiere). Carter now had a new peer group with which to compare himself, and a new source of approbation. It led him, in particular, to look for ways of replacing the traditional thematic basis on which his music, even in the Quartet, had always proceeded.

The Second Quartet was commissioned by the Stanley Quartet of the University of Michigan, a counterpart and competitor of the Walden Quartet of the University of Illinois, who were now the proud dedicatees of a famous work. On seeing the score the Stanleys withdrew (though they did negotiate to keep the dedication), and the premiere was actually given by the Juilliard Quartet, the Parrenin Quartet's American counterpart, at a Juilliard School concert.

Where the First Quartet was expansive in structure and highly continuous in its unfolding, the Second Quartet is very concentrated in form and its texture, somewhat like that of the European avant-garde music of the same decade, is extremely fragmented. The work follows a logic of abrupt contrasts rather than methodical transitions. Again following up on an idea of Ives, embodied in the latter's Second Quartet, the instruments are given consistent "characters," and (as Carter put it) the quartet unfolds like a Samuel Beckett play, a colloquy of archetypal personalities who are basically oblivious of one another.

The four characters — "mercurial" first violin, "laconic" second fiddle, "expressive" viola, and "impetuous" cello — are distinguished from one another not only by general style, but also by a rigorous assignment of musical materials. Among them, in keeping with the principles of the First Quartet, are characteristic tempos, of which the second violin's pulse of MM70/140 is the most rigorously maintained (just as the second violin represented the square and stolid "Rollo" of Ives's Second Quartet.) But this time Carter tried to differentiate the members of the quartet in ways having to do with pitch or harmony as well, in reaction to what he evidently perceived as a failing in the First Quartet, in which the organization of pitch is far less rationalized or consistent than that of rhythm. Even sympathetic critics used terms like "a complete morass"<sup>36</sup> to describe the harmony in the First Quartet, and William Glock had ended his review with a caveat: "I do not know whether every aspect of this quartet is satisfying, whether, for example, the harmonies will prove to be right and convincing after many hearings."<sup>37</sup> Having decided that an atonal, or at least a dissonant and chromatic harmonic language was a contemporary necessity, but being skeptical of serialism—especially "total" serialism—as an organizing principle for reasons having to do with the dilemmas of harmonic randomness openly broached for the first time by Ernst



Krenek in 1960 (see chapter 1), Carter was faced with the necessity of finding a way, as he put it in an interview, “to regain the sensitivity to individual notes.” In other words,

I felt it became more and more important in a dissonant style to make it seem as though every note counted in some way, or that if something wasn't the right note it would make a great deal of difference. Now, it's very difficult to do that in a very dissonant music, especially in music that moves rather quickly and rather thickly. But I've been very concerned with trying to, so to speak, re-energize the tensions of the notes, the qualities of individual pitches.<sup>38</sup>

In practice, this came down to the qualities of the various intervals. In a memoir of Stefan Wolpe, published shortly after the latter's death in 1972, Carter gracefully gave Wolpe (who took over a class for him at Dartington, William Glock's summer school, in 1956) credit for giving him the idea.

He started talking about his *Passacaglia* (1938), a piano work built of sections each based on a musical interval—minor second, major second, and so on. At once, sitting at the piano, he was caught up in a meditation on how wonderful these primary materials, intervals, were; playing each over and over again on the piano, singing, roaring, humming them, loudly, softly, quickly, slowly, short and detached or drawn out and expressive. All of us forgot time passing, when the class was to finish. As he led us from the smallest one, a minor second, to the largest, a major seventh—which took all afternoon—music was reborn, a new light dawned, we all knew we would never again listen to music as we had. Stefan had made each of us experience very directly the living power of these primary elements. From then on indifference was impossible.<sup>39</sup>

Carter's solution to the harmony problem was to combine Wolpe's idea of characterizing intervals with the avant-garde or serialist idea of algorithms. Each of the “characters” in Carter's Second Quartet is assigned a characteristic group of intervals; only major and minor seconds are “unclaimed,” to allow for stepwise melodic lines as neutral material. The leaps, from thirds to tenths, are allocated in keeping with the instrumentalists’ “personalities” as Carter envisaged them, and allied with expressive styles or playing techniques:

Violin I: m3, P5, M9, M10 (bravura style)

Violin II: M3, M6, M7 (strict style; six types of pizzicato)

Viola: tritone, m7, m9 (“romantic” style; glissando, portamento)

Cello: P4, m6, m10 (impulsive style; tempo rubato)

The cello's rubati are actually prescribed in the notation, Carter inventing a dotted slur with an arrowhead to indicate spans where the cellist should deliberately rush (or, more rarely, slow down) while the other instruments keep strict time.

In Ex. 6-14, the first score page of Carter's Second Quartet, in which the four characters are introduced, is juxtaposed with the last, in which they take leave of one another after their various attempts at interaction have failed (immediately following the cellist's brief success at seducing or forcing the rest into a dizzy group accelerando and a—literally—shattering climax). An idea of the degree to which Carter has concentrated the form and thematic content of the music, and the deliberateness with which he has done so, may be gained by comparing the cello's opening solo phrase with the expansive cello “cadenza” that opened the First Quartet.

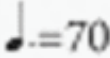
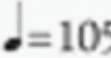

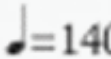
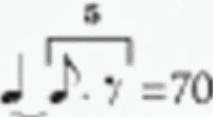
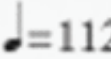
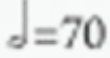

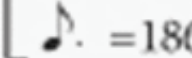
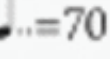
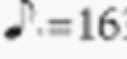
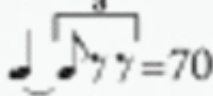
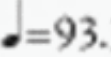
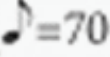
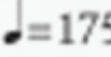
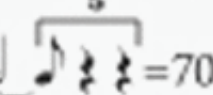
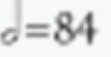
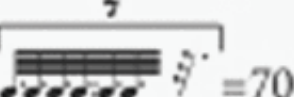
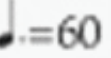
<i>2nd violin pulse</i>	<i>Tempo</i>	<i>Ratio</i>
		2:3
		1:2
		5:8
		5:8
		3:8
		3:7
		3:4
		2:5
		5:6
		7:6

fig. 6-2 Metronomic plan for Carter's Second Quartet (after David Schiff).

The atomistic texture makes recognition of the characters easy. The instrumental parts do little but display their intervallic and stylistic properties in a perpetual mosaic. Every distinguishing feature identified above can be located in the appropriate parts. Most characteristic and Carterish of all is of course the rhythmic behavior of the second violin part, which plays even notes that move in a constant hemiola against the notated meter and tempo, so that its implied pulse is MM105, or MM70. David Schiff has published a chart (Fig. 6-2) showing how all the other pulses in the quartet relate to this basic one, always maintained by the second violin, who thus emerges as something more than a Rollo — perhaps the “Chronometros” (that is, Carter) himself.

As to overall harmony, the great problem of the First Quartet, Carter found a solution that was already implicit in the earlier work. Once the various intervals had been assigned to the different instruments, the trusty all-

interval tetrachords could be mobilized to provide a suitable nexus between the lines. In the Second Quartet, therefore, Carter tried to put the parts in a counterpoint regulated throughout in the way the passage from the first Quartet in Ex. 6-12d was regulated. The normative character thus invested in the /0 1 4 6/ tetrachord made it (so Carter decided) a suitable melodic close for the entire quartet, executed, as might be expected, by the controlling second violin.

The image shows the first page of the score for Elliott Carter's String Quartet No. 2. It consists of four staves: Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), and Violoncello (Vc.). The tempo is marked as quarter note = 105. The score is in 3/4 time and features complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth notes. Dynamic markings range from *pp* to *f*. Performance instructions include *(marc.)*, *non troppo vibrare*, *pizz. normale*, *arco*, and *gliss.*. Circled intervals in the original image represent tetrachords.

ex. 6-14b Elliott Carter, String Quartet no. 2, last score page (all interval tetrachords circled)

The intricacy of these pitch manipulations, on top of the tempo manipulations “inherited” from the First Quartet, made the process of composition Beethovenishly laborious. The sketches for this sixty-two-page composition, now housed at the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basel, Switzerland, run to some two thousand pages (a fact that was publicized at the time of the premiere). The Second Quartet brought Carter recognition in America comparable to what the First had brought him in Europe. It won three major awards, including the Pulitzer Prize. Major performing groups now clamored for the honor of presenting his music, because he now commanded, and his name conferred, as much prestige as theirs. And he continued his efforts to maximalize his style; indeed he was

locked into them, for every new work of his was expected to embody some new technical feature that could be touted as a breakthrough. All were eagerly awaited and received as major events.

The Third Quartet (1971), commissioned by the Juilliard School for the Juilliard Quartet to follow up on their success with the Second, maximalized the salient feature of the First Quartet's third movement, which (as we have seen) was in turn a maximalization of the main musicopoetic idea in Ives's *Unanswered Question*. The whole quartet is built around the opposition of two duos—Violin I and Cello vs. Violin II and Viola—that play what amount to two different pieces at the same time. Duo I, which plays in rubato style throughout, plays four movements (Furioso, Leggerissimo, Andante espressivo, Pizzicato giocoso) in the time it takes Duo II, which plays strictly at all times, to play six movements (Maestoso, Grazioso, Scorrevole, Pizzicato giusto, Largo tranquillo, Appassionato). But these movements are not played straightforwardly through by either duo; after their initial appearances in the order given they are crosscut so that they coexist in many different contrapuntal combinations.

Tempo modulations are so frequent, and the resulting polyrhythms so complex, that the publisher prepared a click track to guide the players (wearing earphones) through their individual parts. (The Juilliard Quartet managed to learn the piece well enough to dispense with the click tracks at the premiere; most ensembles use them in performance.) The form is generated, in a manner borrowed from the Double Concerto, by large background polyrhythms (20:21 and 63:64), which determine the placement of the main structural events. Meanwhile, on the audible surface, the individual parts are of concerto difficulty; the textures are “dense and overgrown,”<sup>40</sup> to quote David Schiff, who compares them to a “rain forest” of microscopic detail; and to top things off, each movement played by each duo is characterized by a different dominating interval. Needless to say, this astounding tour de force of calculation and construction won Carter another Pulitzer Prize. It represented a very pinnacle of “maximum complexity under maximum control,” to recall the shibboleth of New Criticism.

But, as Schiff went on to observe, “events in the work are sometimes gratuitous acts, seemingly without motivation,” although the large gestures form “an unbroken circle, ... at once a series of sharply contrasted moments and a continuous process.”<sup>41</sup> Comments celebrating the complexity of the contrapuntal writing (“traditional species of academic counterpoint never extended to rhythmic proportions as complex as these ...”) may ring a bit hollow in a world of emancipated dissonance; but Carter had indeed made great efforts to avoid the harmonic fortuity that governed the world of total serialism, even if the listening ear was thwarted by the sheer density of detail from discovering the algorithms that were in operation. Any suspicion that Schiff's use of words like “overgrown” and “gratuitous” bore ironic overtones was carefully countered by the traditional modernist verdict: “although the instruments are never called upon to produce untraditional sounds, the overall sonority is strikingly new.”<sup>42</sup> (Actually, the instruments are called upon to produce several new kinds of pizzicato.)

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## Notes:

(36) Joseph Kerman, “American Music: The Columbia Series,” *The Hudson Review* XI, no. 3 (Autumn 1958): 422.

(37) William Glock, “Music Festival in Rome,” *Encounter* II, no. 6 (June 1954): 63.

(38) Benjamin Boretz, “Conversation with Elliott Carter,” *Contemporary Music Newsletter* II, nos. 7–8 (November–December 1968): 3.

(39) Elliott Carter, untitled memoir, in “In Memoriam: Stefan Wolpe (1902–1972),” *Perspectives of New Music* XI, no. 1 (Fall–Winter, 1972): 3.

(40) Schiff, *The Music of Elliott Carter* (1983), p. 260.

(41) *Ibid.*, pp. 260–61.

(42) *Ibid.*, p. 260.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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Elliott Carter

Modernism

Postmodernism

## AT THE PINNACLE

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 6 Standoff (II)

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

Carter had willy-nilly become the chief standard bearer for the traditional modernist view of art and its autonomous history at the very moment when that view began, for reasons that will emerge in the coming chapters, to be embattled (that is, began losing ground). Critics chose precisely the most utopian aspects of Carter's music on which to lavish praise, and began describing his stature, and his achievement, in reckless terms. Reviewing the Third Quartet on its premiere, Andrew Porter (an influential British critic working in New York) dubbed Carter "internationally ...America's most famous living composer"<sup>43</sup> at a time when Aaron Copland and John Cage, to name only two, were still productive. By 1979, Porter was ready to pronounce Carter "the greatest living composer"<sup>44</sup> without qualification, preferring him to Messiaen (Carter's senior by one day) on the argument that "each new work" of Carter's, unlike Messiaen's, "breaks new ground." A year later, Bayan Northcott, another British critic, launched the article on Carter in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* by observing, quite "factually" as befits a reference work, that "at best his music sustains an energy of invention that is unrivalled in contemporary composition."<sup>45</sup> But a familiar problem gnawed, and a familiar ploy persisted. Porter hailed the Third Quartet as "a major new composition, a piece that is passionate, lyrical, and profoundly exciting," despite the fact that "myriad details passed by uncomprehended." A listener, he warned, "will probably never know exactly how precise any particular performance is," and yet the critic was prepared to affirm that "he will no doubt be more deeply moved by accurate than by loose executions."<sup>46</sup> As we have already seen in the case of Stravinsky's response to the Double Concerto, personal judgment is altogether suspended in favor of "trust in the composer," even when there can be no sensory or rational corroboration. Just as in genuine religious thought, faith is accompanied, indeed generated, by bafflement.

Reviewing Carter's *Symphony for Three Orchestras*, in which the multiple perspectives of the Third Quartet are augmented by a sort of hemiola proportion (three independent sound sources as opposed to two, three disparate "movements" at a time, juxtaposed in various unpredictable and sometimes impenetrable combinations), Porter allowed that "at fourth and fifth hearing, much of the detail still remained elusive"<sup>47</sup> even to one following with the score. As far as he was concerned, the pitch organization was meaningless. Yet even so he did not hesitate to pronounce the ultimate accolade: another masterpiece. The conclusion is inescapable that to Porter, and many other critics, Carter's masterpieces were like the noise made by a tree falling in an empty forest. They existed purely "ontologically," by virtue of their perceived complexity, whether or not anyone actually experienced them. Musical value had received its most purely asocial definition.

Ironically enough, it was just at this time, at the peak of his preeminence as an upholder of "absolute" musical value and protagonist of evolutionary history, that Carter began revealing the poetic (yes, "extramusical") ideas that had motivated some of his most forbiddingly abstract constructions. One of these revelations, perhaps the most important one, concerned the Double Concerto, the work that (thanks in part to Stravinsky's active promotion) had vouchsafed Carter's preeminence. In the sleeve note to the second recording of the work, issued in 1968, Carter reprinted a condensation of the original note, quoted near the beginning of this chapter, but

prefaced it as follows:

The idea of writing this *Double Concerto* was suggested to me by the harpsichordist Ralph Kirkpatrick. As my thoughts took shape, the matter of reconciling instruments with different responses to the finger's touch became a central concern. A concept had to be found that made this instrumental confrontation vital and meaningful. This eventually gave rise to the devising of elaborate percussion parts, the choice of instruments for the two orchestras, and a musical and expressive approach that affected every detail. Various relationships of pitched and non-pitched instruments, with the soloists as mediators, and the fragmentary contributions of the many kinds of tone colors to the progress of the sound events were fundamental. After a time, I began to think of a literary analog to the concerto's expected form—Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* [On the Nature of Things], which describes the formation of the physical universe by the random swervings of atoms, its flourishing and destruction. Bit by bit, however, a humorous parody of Lucretius in Alexander Pope's *Dunciad* [1728] took over my thoughts, in lines like:

- All sudden, Gorgons hiss, and Dragons glare,
- And ten-horn'd Fiends and Giants rush to war;
- Hell rises, Heav'n descends, and dance on earth;
- Gods, imps, and monsters, music, rage, and mirth,
- A fire, a jig, a battle, and a ball,
- Till one wide conflagration swallows all.

The beautiful end of Pope's poem seemed to articulate in words the end of the work I had already composed:

- —the all-composing hour
- Resistless falls; the Muse obeys the power.
- She comes! She comes! the sable
- throne behold
- Of Night primeval, and of Chaos old!
- Before her Fancy's gilded clouds decay,
- And all its varying rainbows die away.
- Wit shoots in vain its momentary fires,
- The meteor drops and in a flash expires.
- \*\*\*
- Nor public flame, nor private, dares to shine;
- Nor human spark is left, nor glimpse divine!
- Lo! thy dread empire, Chaos! is restor'd;
- Light dies before thy uncreating word:
- Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;
- And universal Darkness buries all.<sup>48</sup>

The *Double Concerto*, it turned out, was a cosmological allegory. David Schiff, Carter's authorized biographer, writing with the composer's approval and active collaboration, elaborated the allegory into a detailed program that took fourteen printed pages to narrate and minutely relate to the musical unfolding, enabling him to claim that behind the sounds of the music lay a “prophetic vision” communicated through “comic irony”<sup>49</sup>—an even more impressive claim, perhaps, than ever. What matters, ultimately, is less whether the poetry directly inspired the music (although Carter did say that he began thinking of Lucretius while the form was only



“expected,” that is, before the piece was written) than the fact that references to Lucretius and Pope were now being offered to the listener as an explanation of the purpose behind the strange musical discourse and as a guide to its interpretation. At the very least, metaphorical reading made the piece far more accessible to “lay” comprehension. And that was a social gesture.

And a “compromise”? There is no need to ascribe to Carter the ideas, or the motives, of his promoters; but the question nevertheless remains, why was no mention made of the allegory the first time? Was it because of Clement Greenberg's old decree that “subject matter or content” had to be “avoided like a plague” in order to gain the respect of the avant-garde (or even its academic wing)? And why reveal it now?

There may have been some professional mischief in the decision. One of the first audiences to whom Carter revealed the *Double Concerto*'s “extramusical” content was an audience of academic composers at New York University, assembled to hear an interview, or “public conversation,” between Carter and Benjamin Boretz, the editor of *Perspectives of New Music*. Boretz kept nudging Carter toward accounting for the impressive “complexity” of the work in terms of total serialism; in particular, he suggested that the heavy use of unpitched percussion might indicate an interest on Carter's part with turning timbre into an independent “structural element,” since as he put it (his language unconsciously echoing Greenberg's, some thirty years before), “ultimately there is no way to articulate what a composition is ‘about’ except by examining the total intersection of its component continuities, textures, and all its other ‘media.’”<sup>50</sup> Boretz reacted with discomfort bordering on disbelief when Carter, citing his literary models, said that the work “emerges out of a kind of elementary chaos in the percussion,” and “then a great deal happens presenting all its material, and then, in the end, occurs the dissolution of this entire material into chaos, so to speak, with the percussion (as in the beginning).”<sup>51</sup> “I think you might be careful in your use of the word ‘chaos,’”<sup>52</sup> Boretz protested, then somewhat frantically tried to get Carter to take it back (or at least discount it) so as to preserve the music, as an abstract product of “structure” and “medium,” from the social taint of “content”:

I think it's important to emphasize that the notion is metaphorical because, in fact, when you say that one could regard this unpitched opening and its consequent as a progression from “chaos” to “order,” one could equally well invoke any number of other—perhaps seemingly contradictory—images to use as names for exactly this aspect of the relation of the unpitched to the pitched without changing anything in one's understanding or hearing of it in any cognitive sense. In other words, if one were not to use your metaphor, if one were to choose some other metaphor for what happened, could one not still be describing precisely the same set of musical events, and still in fact arriving at the same unique musical structure? In other words, I don't believe the musical structure is really going to be affected by the particular descriptive label one chooses at *this* level of discourse. And in the same sense, it seems to me that your description of the relation of the instrumental medium to the total composition in the *Double Concerto* would only be a rather general remark about what seems so obviously striking an example of a complex and fundamental relation of medium and structure—that is, a rather deep relation between obviously unique aspects of the medium and obviously unique aspects of the continuity, texture, pitch relations, and sound relations of all kinds. So, could you perhaps reconsider...<sup>53</sup>

Carter politely refused Boretz's revision of his answer. By 1968 he could afford to break ranks, slightly, with the Princeton school without soiling his reputation as a serious artist on the most “uncompromising” terms. But there was no question of “populism.” His “extramusical” reference was, in the first place, not to the fairly raw experience of life, still less to the sort of social problems Britten addressed in *Peter Grimes*, but to fairly esoteric classical and neoclassical literature. And the “extramusical” content, such as it was, was on a cosmic plane infinitely removed from that of human tribulation and emotion (save that of wonder).

Carter remained for the rest of the century the chief standard bearer of autonomous musical art, and a bulwark against the “postmodernist” tendencies that began to emerge, and threaten the modernist faith, in the 1980s. His

reputation gathered ever greater luster after the turn of the century as he continued, astoundingly, to compose with undiminished vigor up to and beyond his own centennial anniversary—an absolutely unprecedented feat of creative longevity that made him, finally, a genuine media sensation. Some evidence of ambivalence can be found, beginning in the eighties, in Carter's writings. He has occasionally argued, apparently against the conventional wisdom, that for all its surface complications and its formidable intellectual rigor, his music has always been at bottom an expression—more properly, a representation—of American ideals. “A preoccupation with giving each member of the performing group its own musical identity characterizes my *String Quartet No. 4*,” Carter noted in the preface to that work, published in 1986, “thus mirroring the democratic attitude in which each member of a society maintains his or her own identity while cooperating in a common effort—a concept that dominates all my recent work.”

That message, however sincerely meant, has nevertheless been mediated through a discourse of elitism. In Clement Greenberg's terms, Carter has been, preeminently, the late twentieth century's “musicians' musician.” His visions of democracy have been of interest primarily to a coterie of professionals: fellow composers, performers, scholars, and academically inclined or affiliated critics, for whom Carter's music has often served as a touchstone of self-congratulation. But the ambiguities of Carter's position were always implicit in the way his music has been promoted, ever since he won his European recognition as a protégé of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, clandestinely funded by the CIA in defiance of the egalitarian (or at least anti-intellectual) biases of the United States Congress, which would have opposed the use of tax revenues to support élite culture on the European model. Carter thus became one of the protagonists of that “sublime paradox of American strategy in the cultural Cold War,” defined by Frances Stonor Saunders, whereby “in order to promote an acceptance of art produced in (and vaunted as the expression of) democracy, the democratic process itself had to be circumvented.”<sup>5 4</sup>

Carter's champions have been particularly vocal in defending asocial theories of music history. Especially prominent among them has been Charles Rosen, already mentioned as the pianist in the first performance of the Double Concerto, and one of Carter's strongest advocates in the concert hall. Since the 1970s, Rosen has been an important writer on music, beginning with *The Classical Style*, a treatise on Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, which, having won an important award on publication, has been perhaps the best-selling serious “trade” book (as opposed to textbook) on classical music in the late twentieth century. For forty years, Rosen maintained a substantial literary presence as an essayist and reviewer, largely in the pages of the *New York Review of Books*, one of the most influential of American intellectual journals.

In Carter's success at achieving and maintaining high eminence among contemporary composers despite his lack of audience appeal (an accomplishment in which Rosen himself played a significant role as a performer), Rosen saw evidence that “serious art music will survive as long as there are musicians who want to play it,” or, more strongly, that difficult modernist music has triumphed in spite of audience disaffection owing to “the continued presence of an important group of musicians who passionately want to perform it.”<sup>5 5</sup> The history of music, in short, is created, in Rosen's view, by musicians, and only by musicians.

To maintain this even in the case of Carter is to ignore the social factors, above all the prestige machine and its political stimuli, that could counter, and even overbalance the audience (the one social factor that everybody recognizes as such) in influencing the course of history. Rosen saw himself and others like him as playing a heroic resister's role. As the autonomy model continued to lose credence, the claims on its behalf became ever more sweeping and strident; with the end of the cold war in Europe, the model's anachronistic cold-war underpinnings have become ever more blatant. By 2002, another writer, Paul Griffiths, went so far as morally to equate audience reception with Communist oppression, invoking the tribulations of Dmitry Shostakovich as another demonstration, along with Carter's, of resistance to “the limits on artistic freedom that might be imposed by a tradition, a public or a government.”<sup>5 6</sup>

But as the story of Carter's reception makes especially clear, the asocial esthetic is itself a powerful tradition, and

governments have at times played a significant role in its propagation. By now it is hard, however passionately one has invested in the autonomy principle, to doubt that Rosen's many meritorious public acts on Carter's behalf were made possible not only by Carter, and Carter's emergence was made possible not only by Rosen. Both have been beneficiaries of the prestige machine in which both were willing participants.

The embattled zeal with which Rosen and comparable writers defend the model of musical autonomy that validates Carter's success has led him, like many academic historians, to devalue and dismiss the role of prestige machines in other periods—notably the aristocratic one that influenced Beethoven toward the writing of the “difficult” late works that altered the course of music history two hundred years ago—and to oppose more recent historians who emphasize social factors alongside “musical” ones. Reviewing the work of one such historian, Tia DeNora, who has documented the role of aristocratic patronage in the formation of Beethoven's musical style, Rosen stubbornly minimized such considerations as “influential forces, but rarely determining ones.”<sup>57</sup> The determining forces, in his view, are of course the autonomous activities of composers and performers, people like himself.

But the insistence upon nominating the determining factor instead of evaluating a range of influential ones is a product of the false dichotomy between history and society broached at the beginning of the previous chapter. By the end of this one, it should be clear that the insistence is itself the product of a particular historical juncture, one that is now past. Our task in the concluding chapters of this book will be to assess, and attempt to explain, the situation that has replaced it.

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## Notes:

(43) Andrew Porter, “Mutual Ordering,” *The New Yorker*, 3 February 1973; rpt. in Porter, *A Musical Season: A Critic from Abroad in America* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), p. 140.

(44) Porter, “Famous Orpheus,” *The New Yorker*, 9 January 1979; Porter, *Music of Three More Seasons* (New York: Knopf, 1981), p. 281.

(45) Bayan Northcott, “Carter, Elliott (Cook, Jr.),” in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Vol. III (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 831.

(46) Porter, *A Musical Season*, pp. 145–46.

(47) Andrew Porter, “Great Bridge, Our Myth,” *The New Yorker*, 7 March 1977; Porter, *Music of Three Seasons* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1978), p. 529.

(48) Elliott Carter, liner note to Columbia Records MS 7191 (1968).

(49) Schiff, *The Music of Elliott Carter* (1983), p. 210.

(50) Benjamin Boretz, “A Conversation with Elliott Carter,” p. 3.

(51) *Ibid.*

(52) *Ibid.*

(53) *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

(54) Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, p. 257.

(55) Charles Rosen, *Critical Entertainments*, p. 317.

(56) Paul Griffiths, "Play That Old Piece if You Must, but Not for Old Time's Sake," *New York Times*, Arts and Leisure, 2 June 2002.

(57) Charles Rosen, "Did Beethoven Have All the Luck?" *New York Review of Books*, 14 November 1996; Rosen, *Critical Entertainments*, p. 115.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

## CHAPTER 7 The Sixties

### Changing Patterns of Consumption and the Challenge of Pop

Chapter: CHAPTER 7 The Sixties

Source: MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

## WHAT WERE THEY?

As a catchphrase, “the sixties” does not refer precisely to the decade of the 1960s. Coined in nostalgia, in resentment, at any rate in retrospect, the phrase evokes disruption, a period of social division brought on by a confluence of social transformations. First, and in the United States possibly most important, there was a newly militant and newly successful drive for social equality. The movement for the recognition of the civil rights of racial minorities coincided significantly with the phasing out of European colonial rule in Africa and scored an important victory in 1964 with the passage of a comprehensive Civil Rights Act by the United States Congress.

There was also a new impetus toward the assertion of equal rights for women in public life, coinciding with the development of new techniques of contraception (the “birth control pill”) that made family planning easier and more subject to women's control. Women now sought greater control over other aspects of their lives, including the right to compete as equals in the workplace, and the right to control childbirth. Betty Friedan (1921–2006) published *The Feminine Mystique*, a broad attack on the notion that women could find fulfillment only in childbearing and homemaking, in 1963. The National Organization for Women (NOW), a powerful pressure group with Friedan as its first president, was founded three years later. Women's rights proved more difficult to secure (on paper, at least) than minority rights. A constitutional amendment guaranteeing them failed repeatedly to win ratification by the states, and the guarantee of legal abortion on demand was only won through the courts in 1973.



**fig. 7-1 Civil rights march on Washington, D.C., 28 August 1963.**

Among the other effects of “the pill” was a general loosening of sexual constraints, sometimes called the “sexual revolution,” and, as a corollary, a newly public questioning of the social stigma attached to homosexuality, which culminated in 1969 in a riot at the Stonewall Bar in New York, when a group of patrons forcibly resisted arrest, in a routine police raid, in the name of “gay pride.” Gay rights has been an issue in legal contention, alongside women's rights and racial or ethnic minority rights, ever since. The challenge to the idea that American society was governed by a “mainstream” consensus (often symbolized by the metaphor of a “melting pot”), or a set of norms to which all its members aspired, was one of the sixties’ signal accomplishments. The “mainstream,” especially when asserted in the realm of culture, came under increasing fire as a metaphor for an unjust status quo, or a covert locus of authoritarian domination and oppression. The pluralism thus ushered in (denounced by its opponents as amoral relativism) had a powerful impact on education and the arts.

The Stonewall riot was also an example of a new assertiveness in public protest and civil disobedience that characterized the sixties, aroused in the first instance by widespread opposition to the American government's pursuit of an unpopular war against Communist expansion in Southeast Asia. What the government and the military saw (and defended) as a natural consequence of cold-war policies was increasingly perceived as reckless intervention in the internal affairs of the “Third World,” the technologically less advanced nations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, many of them (like Vietnam, the site of the American war) newly liberated from colonial rule. The Vietnam war was viewed by many as a continuation of colonialist aggression under cover of cold-war politics, as well as an unjustified threat to a generation of American men whose lives were thus put at

risk—a threat that, owing to inequities in the draft laws, put a disproportionate and indefensible burden on the same minorities whose rights were a separate (but obviously not unconnected) object of contention and negotiation.

Opposition to the war, which came (especially in the eyes of those whose lives were threatened by the draft) to symbolize the general political and ethical corruption of the powerful countries of “the West,” stimulated a new political militancy. Active resistance was mobilized by, and on behalf of, a self-proclaimed “New Left” of radical intellectuals and politicians who questioned the authority of the government to impose its policies on an unwilling population. Others, who became known as “hippies” (from “hip,” a slang word meaning aware or up-to-date), indulged in passive resistance, rejecting the social mores of conventional (“bourgeois”) society and withdrawing (or “dropping out”) from the public sphere into a utopian communitarian “counterculture” devoted to the spontaneous expression of love and to spiritual introspection, the latter often enhanced by the use of narcotics or “psychedelic” (sensation-magnifying or “mind-expanding”) drugs like lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), known medically as psychotomimetic, since they artificially reproduce the symptoms of psychosis, or mental defection from environmental reality.

None of these phenomena originated during the calendar decade of the 1960s, nor did any come to an end with its passing. The active struggle for racial equality went back at least to 1948, when Harry S. Truman made civil rights an important plank in his platform for reelection as president of the United States, and caused a violent split within his party that led to a rival States Rights Democratic (or “Dixiecrat”) candidate for president, Strom Thurmond (1902–2003), who campaigned in support of continued racial segregation. In 1954, the United States Supreme Court declared racially segregated schools unconstitutional, and in 1955 the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–68) organized a boycott by black residents of Montgomery, Alabama, against the segregated city bus lines. He later attained national prominence by advocating nonviolent but provocative resistance to statutory racial segregation throughout the southern United States.

Opposition to the cold war and to the interventionist policies justified on its behalf also went back to the late 1940s. Popular agitation in support of nuclear disarmament, led by organizations like the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, were a staple of the 1950s, despite the political stigma attached to the “peace” movement by conservative politicians wary (not always groundlessly) of its co-option by Soviet propagandists. Contraceptive devices, including the earliest oral ones, were available before 1960. The movement for women's rights has a history extending back to the nineteenth century. Even the “drug culture” had a pre-sixties history, associated with the “beat generation,” a loosely organized group of artists and writers active in the 1950s who rejected the structures and institutions of bourgeois society and sought an intense subjective illumination that became their subject matter.

The identification of all these sociopolitical movements and phenomena with “the sixties” can be attributed in part to the general intensification they all underwent in reaction to the unrest spawned by the Vietnam war, or rather to the gross expansion of the American military presence there, and the attendant casualties, that began under President Lyndon Johnson in 1965. The “counterculture,” for example, reached an early peak in the summer of 1967—known in legend as the “Summer of Love”—when about 75,000 hippies made pilgrimage to the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco and turned it into a giant commune awash in psychedelic drugs and procreation-free sex. It is hard not to associate that large figure with another large figure: the 10,000 American soldiers killed in Vietnam that year without any visible progress in the fortunes of an unpopular and increasingly incomprehensible war.

But reference to “the sixties” as a catchphrase in America probably owes the most to a series of violent events that shocked American society and created a watershed in collective memory. The most stunning ones, perhaps, were the three political assassinations that followed one another in short succession: first, that of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas, Texas, on 22 November 1963; second, that of Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis, Tennessee, on 4 April 1968; and third, a scant two months later, that of Robert F. Kennedy, the late president's

younger brother, then campaigning for election as president himself on an antiwar platform, in Los Angeles, California, on 5 June 1968.

In that same spring of 1968, student demonstrators occupied several buildings on the campus of Columbia University, and a week later were forcibly (and, some thought, brutally) ejected by the New York City police, who had been called in by the university administration. Pictures of bloody students filled the newspapers. Then, in August of the same year, prolonged violent confrontations between the Chicago police and antiwar demonstrators outside the Democratic National Convention were broadcast for days on national television. The trial that followed, in which a group of New Left, hippie, and black-activist defendants known as the "Chicago Eight" did their best to mock the proceedings and provoke the judge, was an enormously polarizing event.

So searing were the impressions of the *annus horribilis* 1968, and so dismaying to a society that had prided itself on its capaciousness and tolerance, that the culminating—objectively worse—events that followed in 1970 (like the killing by the Ohio State Militia of four students on the campus of Kent State University; or the lethal explosion of a pipe bomb in New York by a group known as the Weathermen, who had split off from the New Left organization Students for a Democratic Society; or another activist-planted bomb that blew up the mathematics research building at the University of Wisconsin, killing a graduate student who was working late) could not dislodge "the sixties" from their emblematic status.

The meaning or achievement of all that "sixties" unrest, which accomplished no clear objective (not even the ending of the Vietnam war, which sputtered to an ignominious close in 1975), is of course a matter of furious and continuing debate. Some, emphasizing the sexual and psychedelic aspects of the era, look back on the decade as a period of hedonism and irresponsibility that did lasting damage to the social fabric. Others, idealizing its optimism and social activism, look back on it as a period of incipient, unstoppable, irreversible, and eventually positive democratic change. What all must agree on, and what the foregoing description has already tacitly disclosed, is that the era of "the sixties" was driven to an unprecedented degree by young people, chiefly students. The "counterculture" was youth culture, and so was the activism of the period.

Indeed one of the dominant descriptors of the sixties as a historical period is the phrase "generation gap," referring to the massive exacerbation of perennial generational tensions, during that decade and its aftermath, into bitter antagonism. One of the culminating artifacts of the period, dating from 1970, was a movie, *Joe*, that climaxed with the vigilante massacre of a hippie commune by two disgruntled members of the older generation, one a successful advertising man, the other a blue-collar worker, turned improbably (but, in the context of the period, plausibly) into allies by their shared hatred of the young.

Significantly, one of the killers, a family man, was motivated by resentment of the hippie culture that had claimed his daughter; the other, a war veteran, was moved by outrage at student activism and the lack of patriotism it implied. The two manifestations of youth culture, while distinguishable in retrospect (and even at the time), had merged into a single provocation, even as they had been themselves provoked in large measure by a single affront. The movie opened barely two months after the shootings at Kent State, which had sparked the greatest single outpouring of rage on American campuses, with student "strikes" disrupting end-of-year exercises (exams, commencements) all over the country. If nothing else, the spring and summer of 1970 showed what a powerful force youth—or to be more precise, affluent middle-class youth—had become.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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## THE MUSIC OF YOUTH

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 7 The Sixties

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

The unprecedented freedom of action of the younger generation, amounting in some ways to virtual economic independence, was by the dawn of the 1960s a recognized fact of life not only in American society, but in all the affluent societies of the world. That power was a direct consequence of affluence. Long before it was an independent social or political force, youth was an independent market force. And like any powerful consumer force it was catered to (or, depending on one's attitude, exploited). The two consumer domains that catered most importantly to youth, both of which underwent transformation during the sixties along with "youth culture" itself, were those of clothing fashion and entertainment, chiefly music.

Now that our area of special interest has been named, it must remain our focus. For the first time in this book (and look how late it comes!) we will trace a bit of the history of "popular" music—music disseminated for commercial profit, not primarily through literate media—in its own right, not solely in terms of its appropriation by the literate culture that is our primary subject. The reason we must do this now is that the popular music associated with the youth culture of the sixties became a transforming force affecting all other musics, even as it aspired on its own to usurp their status. Seen in this way, sixties popular music enacted a "revolution" similar to that ascribed to the period's activist culture and "counterculture," for both of which it provided the indispensable soundtrack.

As a preliminary attestation, consider the most momentous countercultural event of all: a free music festival held in August 1969 on a farm near Woodstock, New York—about fifty miles north of New York City—and attended by upwards of half a million hippies and their sympathizers. It was are markable, and never duplicated, spectacle of nonviolence to offset the events of 1968, and its memory kept the spirit of the youth movement alive into the 1970s. (And yet every attempt to recapture it—notably the Altamont Festival organized later that year near San Francisco, where members of a motorcycle gang disrupted the proceedings with violent acts that led to at least one highly publicized fatality—was, conversely, symptomatic of the movement's entropy and decline.)

The first music that was aimed expressly at a youth market was that of the "crooners" or male microphone singers of the 1940s, whose up-close, almost whispered style reminiscent of "pillow talk" appealed irresistibly to adolescent girls ("bobby-soxers") in the throes of discovering their sexuality. The most successful of them, Frank Sinatra (1915–98), began his career as a "big-band" jazz singer but reached an early peak of popularity as a soloist singing "ballads," soft, slow, intimate songs in which he modeled his style on that of Bing Crosby (1904–77), who in turn had appropriated some of his signature techniques from the performance practices of African-

American blues singers. These included singing on consonants, decorating the tunes with improvised appoggiaturas and slurred melismas, and distending the rhythm, chiefly by delaying stressed syllables.

Sinatra's career as a ballad crooner lasted from around 1940 to 1947, encompassing World War II (when audiences at home were disproportionately female) and the immediate postwar years. After a prolonged slump he made a comeback in the mid-1950s and remained a popular entertainer for the rest of his life, but no longer as a performer appealing primarily to a youth audience. For by then the youth market had been cornered by a style known as rock 'n' roll, "the live wire,"<sup>1</sup> in the nostalgic words of the sociologist Todd Gitlin, one of the main "sixties" historians, "that linked bedazzled teenagers around the nation—and quickly around the world—into the common enterprise of being young." Gitlin's words were well chosen. Far more than any previous popular music, rock 'n' roll made an exclusive appeal to youth. Indeed it is fair to say that it was, at least in part, a style calculated to irritate and antagonize the older generation, and was often marketed expressly as a means of widening the generation gap. Thus, unlike virtually all previous popular music, it was the opposite of family entertainment. It was socially divisive as well as uniting, and in its own way it fostered elitism. It was, in short, a kind of modernism. Gitlin's recollections are droll and to the point:

Parents who winced, like mine, "How can you stand that noise!" also helped define what it meant to like rock; if there had ever been any doubt, "that noise" now meant, "Something my parents can't stand." To the question, "How can you listen to that stuff?" the teenager answered, in effect: "I've got what it takes, and you, the old, the over-the-hill, don't."<sup>2</sup>

Precisely, in other words, what the devotee of *Wozzeck* implied when coolly confronting the objections of the traditional operagoer, or what total serialism implied in its affront to neoclassicism. As "the sixties" approached, the modernist discourse was beginning to turn generations against one another in more fundamental ways than taste, but taste remained the emblem. In this way, rock 'n' roll was a genuine harbinger of the culture of the sixties.

The terms "rock 'n' roll" and "teenager," as a matter of fact, were nearly coeval. The widespread use of "teenager" or "teen" to mean a person between the ages of thirteen and nineteen was a product of the postwar economic boom. In one of those paradoxes that the sociologist Daniel Bell summed up in the phrase "the cultural contradictions of capitalism,"<sup>3</sup> the independent identity of teenagers, and their economic and cultural freedom, were proclaimed most effectively by the clothing and entertainment markets that most powerfully manipulated and exploited them.

Credit for coining the term "rock 'n' roll" was claimed by Alan Freed (1921–65), a Cleveland disk jockey. His was a new profession that arose when situation comedies and live variety shows deserted radio for the new medium of television, leaving empty air time to fill with nonstop recorded music. Radio stations began pitching their musical offerings to "niche" markets. Freed had the inspired idea of purveying recordings of black performers (known as "race" records when their sales were confined to urban ghettos) to a white youth audience. By the early 1950s such music was being marketed under the less demeaning rubric of "rhythm and blues," or R&B. It was essentially blues and gospel singing enhanced by a driving percussive beat, and had been thought too raw and uncultivated for dissemination on "mainstream" (white) radio.

Freed proved that, given a euphemistic name that further camouflaged its ghetto origins, it was indeed marketable—and then some!—as dance music to white suburban teenagers eager for a badge of identification as members of the "youth culture." The success and dissemination of the new genre were facilitated by technology: cheap, highly portable transistor radios that enabled fans to carry the music around with them everywhere. Freed's claim to have coined its name has been disputed: some historians trace the term "rock 'n' roll" back to rural "Holiness" churches in the deep south as early as the 1920s, when congregations "rocked and reeled" to the antecedents of rhythm and blues, the actual black-American church music that set the words of the gospel to syncopated blues melodies accompanied by guitars, trumpets, and drums. But Freed had the courage—or the

commercial savvy—to play R&B recordings by black performers like Ray Charles (1930–2004) and James Brown (1933–2008) while his imitators mainly played “covers”—remakes of R&B songs by white singers who toned down both their insistent rhythm and their often frankly sexual lyrics.

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fig. 7-2 Elvis Presley, 1957.

Even the covers, however, retained enough recognizable “race” content to inspire a backlash from white supremacists. That racial provocation, added to a rhythmic insistence that evoked a virtually irresistible kinesthetic (= sexual?) response, made the music controversial whether designated R&B or rock ‘n’ roll, and whether performed by blacks or by whites. Frank Sinatra, commercially threatened as well as morally affronted by it, told a Congressional investigating committee in 1957, “Rock ‘n’ roll smells phony and false,” and that “it is sung, played, and written for the most part by cretinous goons.”<sup>4</sup> But the same provocations also allied the

music willy-nilly with the progressive politics of the civil rights movement. Never before had a commercial music carried so much heavy cultural and political baggage.

The most successful rock 'n' roll performer by far was the Mississippi-born singer and guitarist Elvis Presley (1935–77), who did more than any other individual to establish the music, in the measured words of the *New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, “as a youth culture and the symbol of teenage rebellion.”<sup>5</sup> He made his first records in Memphis, Tennessee, in 1954, the year of the Supreme Court's desegregation decree. He achieved nationwide fame in 1956, when his manager, “Colonel” Tom Parker, negotiated a contract with RCA Victor, a major label with coast-to-coast distribution, and he made the first of his three appearances on the nationally broadcast *Ed Sullivan Show*, the most popular television variety program of the day.

More frankly than any previous white performer, Presley consciously cultivated a “black” style, which, although it played into invidious racial and sexual stereotypes (amplified by suggestive body movements that earned him the nickname “Elvis the Pelvis”), greatly magnified his allure with young white audiences of both sexes, and spurred the movement, alarming to many, toward what Gitlin memorably called “cultural miscegenation.”<sup>6</sup> It created a dilemma for liberals who deplored the culturally alien music their children were listening to even as they reacted with indignation to the violent racist backlash the civil-rights movement had spurred. Unconscious (or at least unacknowledged) racial and sexual anxieties were fused, and further widened the generation gap. The third time Elvis the Pelvis appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, the producers made a concession to parental disquiet and showed him only from the waist up. Cutting off his lower body turned him in effect into a castrato, and invested him with all the subversive allure those manufactured uncanny beings had evoked two centuries before.

And yet whatever the rebellious solidarity that teenagers felt for rock 'n' roll in the 1950s, it usually gave way to traditional rites of passage, particularly for white affluent males who could afford higher education. College remained a gateway to “adulthood,” in musical taste as in other areas of culture. Surveys by sociologists showed a consistent pattern. Young men who had listened through high school to the “Top Forty”—rock 'n' roll songs plugged on the radio and ranked in popularity according to sales figures for records—renounced them on reaching college in favor of three “adult” musical categories: classical, jazz, and “folk.” Colleges and universities actively abetted the change by administering courses, often required, in “music appreciation,” which acquainted the leaders of tomorrow with the classical canon and encouraged their identification with it. Jazz history was sometimes offered as an elective, but more commonly jazz was fostered on campuses, along with classical music, through performing organizations and by officially sponsored concerts.

“Folk” music also received sponsorship from campus concert bureaus, but the term is somewhat misleading. In the present context it designates not the work of actual “folk” singers (by definition unpaid amateurs who sang as a by-product of, or an accompaniment to, their daily working lives) but rather that of professional musicians performing popularized arrangements of folk songs (or composed folk-style songs) from around the world. The folk group that commanded the widest following at first was the Weavers, a quartet of singing instrumentalists (on guitar, dulcimer, banjo, recorder, etc.) who came together in 1948. The group's best-known member, Pete Seeger (b. 1919), was the son of Charles Seeger (1886–1979), an eminent musicologist and composer long identified with left-wing politics. Professional folksingers were from the beginning associated with labor and social protest movements.

The Weavers fell victim to the anti-Communist blacklists of the McCarthy era, but not before they had established a successful entertainment model that attracted imitators who kept the “folk” genre alive into the sixties, when several charismatic solo performers began to appear, including Joan Baez (b. 1941), Bob Dylan (originally named Robert Allen Zimmerman, b. 1941), Judy Collins (b. 1939), and Joni Mitchell (b. 1943). Except for Baez, these singers sang material of their own creation in addition to traditional music, in effect blurring the line between “folk” and “pop.”



fig. 7-3 Bob Dylan in the 1960s.

A taste for “folk” singers or groups remained an indication of political commitment. Although groups like the Kingston Trio (formed in 1957) or Peter, Paul, and Mary (formed in 1961) cultivated a more clean-cut “collegiate” image than the Weavers and steered clearer of overtly controversial material, their songs continued to broach social issues. Peter, Paul, and Mary identified strongly with the antiwar movement, included Pete Seeger songs in their repertoire, and cut a couple of hit records in 1963 that carried messages that were widely interpreted as radical. “Puff, the Magic Dragon” (1963), nominally a children’s song, was read (mainly by nervous politicians) as a metaphorical endorsement of the emerging drug counterculture; and “Blowin’ in the Wind” (1963) was a Bob Dylan song that warned—or could be read as warning—of the consequences if the civil rights movement were thwarted: “How many years can some people exist before they’re allowed to be free?” The

line between “folk” and commercial popular music became more and more permeable. Paul Stookey, the “Paul” in Peter, Paul, and Mary, started out as a rock ‘n’ roll guitarist, and continued to draw on the style of playing in which he was trained. But the absence of percussion, and the eschewal of electric amplification, effectively distinguished the “folk” from the commercial product, and lent it an air of “authenticity” on which folk performers particularly traded. Authenticity, the romantic notion that music is, and must remain, true to itself (that is, to its origins) and aesthetically “disinterested,” and that musicians sincerely express their individual personalities, was of course also a major selling point for jazz and classical music, at least as distinguished from commercial pop. But calling it a “selling point” already exposes its illusory (if not downright deceptive) premises.

It was, however, the basis on which that mandatory change of taste that accompanied college enrollment through the 1950s depended. If taste in music was to define one's mature personality, that music had to be regarded as authentically personal in its own right. And along with the issue of personal authenticity went the corollary phenomenon that sociologists observed. No one opted for all three “adult” tastes; at least one had to be rejected, since a sense of personal identity depended on discrimination as well as identification.

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## Notes:

(1) Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), p. 37.

(2) *Ibid.*, p. 42.

(3) Cf. Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

(4) Quoted in Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave, *Anti-Rock: The Opposition to Rock'n'Roll* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), p. 46.

(5) Ken Tucker, “Presley, Elvis (Aaron),” in *New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, Vol. III (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 624.

(6) Gitlin, *The Sixties*, p. 39.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

See also from Grove Music Online

The Beatles

Pop

## THE BRITISH "INVASION"

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 7 The Sixties

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

That rule began to change during the 1960s. As popular music styles continued to develop along with the rest of "sixties" culture, pop began claiming the loyalty of its audience into adulthood irrespective of educational level; and it began claiming the mantle of "authenticity" as well. The watershed, both in terms of musical content and in terms of audience tenacity, was the advent of the Beatles, an English rock 'n' roll group that first performed in America in 1964, soon to be followed by additional British "invaders" like the Rolling Stones, the Who, and many others. They now became the chief model of emulation for American pop performers.



fig. 7-4 The Beatles returning from America, 1964.

Unlike the earlier generation of rock 'n' roll performers, the British groups performed almost exclusively

material of their own creation. Two of the Beatles, rhythm guitarist John Lennon (1940–80) and bass guitarist Paul McCartney (b. 1942), were prolific songwriters who often collaborated (though never in the traditional lyricist-tunesmith fashion; both contributed both words and music). The lead guitarist, George Harrison (1943–2001), also wrote some much-noticed and influential songs for the group, leaving only the drummer, Ringo Starr (originally named Richard Starkey, b. 1940) confined for the most part to the role of performer.

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fig. 7-5 Electric guitar made by Bruce BecVar in 1974.

Their styles were ultimately beholden to the black-American R&B antecedents of all rock 'n' roll; and they all conformed to what had become the standard rock 'n' roll instrumentation (amplified electric guitars and keyboards plus a "trap set" or one-man jazz percussion outfit). But the British groups were far more eclectic in their stylistic range than their American counterparts had been, and their creative aims were far more

ambitious, emulating those of jazz and classical musicians, on whom they eventually had an influence that the original "authentic" rock 'n' roll performers never approached.

Mostly comprising middle-class youths with at least a full secondary education, the British groups had a native inheritance of Anglo-Celtic folk music (partly mediated through the hymnody of the Anglican church) that gave their melodies a "modal" character that distinguished it from the American product, lending it a "folk" aura that conveyed both authenticity and exoticism, heightening its charm for Americans. The irony was that these were precisely the aspects of their music that seemed most formulaic and conventional (= commercial) at home, while it was the black-American component that gave them there the authentic/exotic aura.

Beyond that, Lennon and (especially) McCartney had a nodding acquaintance with the jazz and classical repertoires, including their most modern varieties, and Harrison had enough curiosity about non-Western musics to learn to perform creditably on the Indian sitar. Their record producer, George Martin, was a conservatory graduate who not only was responsible for writing arrangements for the group whenever the performing forces exceeded the original quartet, but also gave them technical and technological pointers that contributed greatly to their distinctive, and ever broadening, sound image. The basic creative work, however, was done by Lennon, McCartney, and Harrison, who like virtually all pop musicians worked exclusively by ear, none of them having been trained to read musical notation with any facility.

Their appeal was phenomenally—to many, incredibly—broad. At first their music was of a lightweight, sweet, and simple if spirited character, and it was to the traditional audience for male pop-singers that they appealed, namely adolescent females (now called teenyboppers). During their second American tour, in the summer of 1965, they filled New York's Shea Stadium (capacity 55,600) with screaming girls and their less excited boy friends. Some observers were disgruntled by their success, attributing it to dilution. Nat Hentoff (b. 1925), a jazz critic and a left-leaning political commentator, tried to write them off by suggesting that the Beatles "turned millions of American adolescents on to what had been here hurting all the time," but (turning the venom now on the audience) "the young here never did want it raw so they absorbed it through the British filter."<sup>7</sup> But Elvis Presley's raw success had already belied Hentoff's nationalistic grousing; moreover, by then the music of the Beatles was attracting fans from unprecedented walks of musical life, whose enthusiasm, first at home and eventually in America and continental Europe, began influencing the group in unexpected ways. The remarkable synergy thus initiated made the Beatles the truly emblematic musical phenomenon of the sixties, with far-reaching consequences for music history, including the kind of music history this book has been tracing.

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## Notes:

(7) Quoted in Ned Rorem, "The Music of the Beatles," *New York Review of Books*, 18 January 1968; in Elizabeth Thomson and David Gutman, *The Lennon Companion* (New York: Schirmer, 1987), p. 100.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

See also from Grove Music Online

The Beatles

Paul McCartney

Ned Rorem

## DEFECTION

Chapter: CHAPTER 7 The Sixties

Source: MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

As early as 1963, a very dignified English classical music critic—William Mann (1924–89), the chief reviewer for *The Times* of London, who had seriously studied piano and composition in his youth—surprised his readers by naming Lennon and McCartney the outstanding new composers of the year, and comparing an “Aeolian” chord progression in their song “Not a Second Time” with the heartrending ending of Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde*, about the loftiest comparison a critic could make in the heyday of the Mahler revival (Ex. 7-1).



ex. 7-1a Progression from John Lennon/Paul McCartney, “Not a Second Time”

ex. 7-1b Gustav Mahler, *Das Lied von der Erde*, end

Mann went on to describe “pandiatonic clusters”<sup>8</sup> in another song, and praised the Beatles’ modulations to the flat submediant, hallowed as an expressive device since Schubert’s day. His article was greeted mainly with chuckles and filed away as an eccentricity (critics, too, sometimes like to “shock the bourgeoisie”). The

correspondences Mann found between his favorite classical music and that of the Beatles were not taken seriously as a comment on the Beatles' creative sources or range, but were taken only as an inventory of the critic's own musical tastes and memory. Besides, the net effect of such praise from an established critic was to declare the music "safe" for establishment consumption—perhaps not the greatest endorsement for a pop group in an age of social rebellion.

Their music continued to evolve with the decade, however, in ways that affected both its content and its musical range, and continued to broaden its appeal to various audiences. Beginning with two LP disks, *Revolver* (1966) and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), the Beatles produced "concept albums" in which all the songs on an LP record were coordinated, like the individual numbers in a romantic song cycle, to contribute to an overall impression that was unified not only by textual content but by aspects of the musical treatment as well.

*Revolver* contained songs about social alienation and economic injustice—and not always injustice to underdogs: one song, "Taxman" by Harrison, concerned the perceived injustice of the British tax system on high-income earners such as the Beatles had become. The music was enhanced by whirling electronic effects that seemed to provide a sonic analogue to the visual hallucinations brought on by psychedelic drugs, already reflected in the work of "pop" and "op" artists then straddling the edge between avant-garde and commercial art, and in the graphic designs of Peter Max (b. 1937), the quintessential visual embodiment of the "sixties" spirit.

Moderately

Turn off your mind, re - lax  
is all, that love

and float down - stream;  
is ev - ry - one; It is not  
dy - ing, it is not dy - ing,  
know - ing, it is not know - ing,

ex. 7-2 John Lennon/Paul McCartney, “Tomorrow Never Knows,” opening

This taste of the avant-garde was mainly contributed by McCartney, who spent the early months of 1966 (when the other members of the group were away on family vacations and honeymoons) attending concerts of electronic music and listening to recordings of Stockhausen and Berio. The first fruit of this experimental phase was “Tomorrow Never Knows,” a song recorded in April 1966 for *Revolver* (Ex. 7-2). Lennon’s words (“Turn off your mind, relax and float downstream...”) conjured up a “drug trip” while the music unfolded a slow arpeggio over a single C-major triad (inflected at times by neighbor notes in inner voices and a “blue” seventh), accompanied by a drone from Harrison’s sitar and further enhanced in the recording studio with reverberation effects, tape loops, and guitar chords recorded and run backward through the tape machine—virtually the whole panoply of musique concrète devices pioneered in the studios of Paris, New York, and Cologne during the

previous decade. These devices gave the song a quality that could be captured neither in vocal score (produced, like all popular “sheet music,” after the fact), nor even in live performance. In a sense, the Beatles were no longer writing songs. Like some of the avant-garde icons of the day, they were creating collages—finished artworks, artifacts on tape that could not be adequately reproduced in other media. Accordingly, they stopped touring at the end of the year in which their second concept album appeared.

In its songs of social criticism (generally mild but occasionally pungent, as in “Eleanor Rigby,” a hopeless portrait of urban loneliness) and its psychedelic electronic colors, *Revolver* struck an authentic “sixties” note, charting territory never previously visited by popular music meant for mass dissemination, partly at the expense of the usual pop subject matter like young love. That new conceptual and musical seriousness was intensified in *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. The cover showed the newly shaggy, bearded Beatles dressed like the imaginary vaudeville band of the title, standing amid a crowd of cutout portraits of their acknowledged models and mentors. They included all-purpose saints of modernity like Albert Einstein, and all-purpose icons of right thinking like Mahatma Gandhi. And also there, for those who recognized him, was Karlheinz Stockhausen.

Traditional pop entertainment values were by no means abandoned; but, rather daringly, the possibility was skirted. The title song casts the album as an imaginary stage show given by an imaginary concert band. The album ends (or seems to end) with a reprise of the opening number, enclosing not only the concept but the musical contents in a structure transcending the individual songs. But the album turns out not to end with that musical recapitulation. There is a harrowing coda of commentary in the form of “A Day in the Life,” the final song, which (in the words of the critic Ian MacDonald) seemed to anticipate “the shift from 1967, the year of peace and love, to 1968, the ‘year of the barricades.’”<sup>9</sup> Its ending is shown in Ex. 7-3.

This unusually long song (5'33", too long for a 45 RPM single, or for conventional disk-jockey treatment) was inspired by the violent death of a friend, Tara Browne, a rich dilettante who savored the countercultural scene and who (possibly under the influence of LSD) had crashed his sports car into a parked van. The lyrics consist in part of a surrealistic collage of glumly dispassionate newspaper reports—of Browne's death, of a story on potholes in a Lancastershire town, of a military victory (surely an oblique reference to Vietnam)—followed by an invitation to a drugged escape (“I'd love to turn you on...”).

The real message of the song, ambiguous and disquieting, is delivered between the verses, by a sound effect borrowed directly from the avant-garde's bag of tricks. Forty London orchestral musicians (twelve violinists, four violists, four cellists, two double-bassists, a harpist, an oboist, two clarinetists, two bassoonists, two flutists, two French hornists, three trumpeters, three trombonists, a tubist, and a timpanist) were recruited for the recording sessions, which took place in January and February 1967. They were each given a chart consisting of a low note and a high note, and were instructed to play gradually from the one to the other over a span of twenty-four bars, choosing the exact pitches ad libitum, making no attempt at rhythmic coordination with the other musicians, and getting louder all the while. As McCartney knew, it was the kind of thing one expected in a score by John Cage (or perhaps by Krzysztof Penderecki); and George Martin, who helped plan it, was delighted that the hired musicians reacted to the idea with the same bewilderment otherwise reserved for the likes of Cage and Penderecki.



V. *C* *C<sup>6</sup>7* *Em* *Em<sup>7</sup>*

They had to count them all... Now they know how many holes it takes to fill the Albert Hall

Pno.

This system contains the first two lines of music. The vocal line (V.) is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. It features lyrics: "They had to count them all... Now they know how many holes it takes to fill the Albert Hall". The piano accompaniment (Pno.) consists of a grand staff with treble and bass clefs. The guitar part is shown in a separate staff with a treble clef, displaying chords: C, C67, Em, and Em7. The bass line includes a complex rhythmic pattern with triplets and sixteenth notes.

*C* *C* *N.C.*

I'd love to turn you on

Up and cresc.

This system contains the next two lines of music. The vocal line (V.) continues with lyrics: "I'd love to turn you on". The piano accompaniment (Pno.) continues with a grand staff. The guitar part (Guitar) is shown in a separate staff with a treble clef, displaying chords: C, C, and N.C. (Natural Chord). The bass line continues with complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth notes. A dynamic marking "Up and cresc." is present in the piano part.

ex. 7-3 John Lennon/Paul McCartney, "A Day in the Life," end

The powerful chaotic crescendo thus produced appears twice in the recording; once in the middle and again at the end, where it is followed by a big E-major triad banged out by three pianos (dampers raised) and a harmonium. As the chord faded away, the recording engineer "rode gain," compensating for its decay by boosting the volume, so that the sound hung uncannily in the air for almost a minute, more than a fifth of the song's total running time. To conclude, a bit of "empty air" from the studio sessions was spliced on, which was not really empty but contained some low, incomprehensible background muttering and laughter from the members of the group. On the LP album as originally issued, this final component was recorded on the continuous inside groove, so that (as the critic Allan Kozinn put it) "the Beatles could be heard chortling continuously until the listener lifted the stylus from the disc."<sup>10</sup> What did all this mean? What *could* all this mean? The latter, of course, was the operative question, for a large part of the album's reception took the form of

endless speculation, exegesis, and debate—unequivocally an “art” (as opposed to “entertainment”) reception.

William Mann saw vindication in this, and came back with a more elaborate essay in the *Times*, “The Beatles Revive Hopes of Progress in Pop Music,” published on 1 June 1967 in the immediate aftermath of *Sgt. Pepper*. The very title carried a freight of “classical” discourse, for it was only in the “historicist” realm of the classics that stylistic progress had become a byword. Pop traditionally trafficked in (indeed, was often defined by) quick—even planned—obsolescence. (The nice thing about popular music, the snobbish quip used to go, is that it is not popular for very long.)

Now, Mann observed, the Beatles were producing a music that did not fade so quickly, in part because they were growing up with their audience, and in part (reciprocally) because their audience was staying loyal to them in a fashion that defied pop precedent. Their secret, he suggested, lay in their ever-expanding eclecticism:

The young teenagers of 1963 who fell like hungry travellers upon the Merseyside Beat [i.e. the music emanating from Liverpool, the Beatles’ hometown, on the Mersey River] are now much older and more sophisticated, and more experienced in adult ways. Pop music still has to cater for them and for the distinctive characteristics they have by now assumed. Mod, rocker [i.e., followers of London “sixties” fashions in dress and music respectively], intellectual, rebel, permissive, careerist, all get comfort of inspiration from different music, and The Beatles have held their supremacy because they can dip into all these inkwells with equally eloquent results.<sup>11</sup>

Mann pointed to the powerful lyrics of songs like “Eleanor Rigby” and rightly sensed the influence of Bob Dylan in stimulating the new social consciousness of pop. He welcomed the “oriental” sitar into the stylistic mix, along with the “more or less disciplined whorls of electronically manipulated clusters of sound”<sup>12</sup> (for which, he primly noted, “the vogue word” was “psychedelic music”). He cited the “hurricane glissandi” and “whoosh noises” of “A Day in the Life” as the reason for the song’s notoriously misguided temporary ban on the BBC, although (as he pointed out) the lyrics of several other songs also contained “ambivalent references to drug-taking.”

Mann ended his piece with a combination of taunt and prayer, noting that the banned song “is more genuinely creative than anything currently to be heard on pop radio stations, but in relationship to what other groups have been doing lately *Sgt. Pepper* is chiefly significant as constructive criticism, a sort of pop music master class examining trends and correcting or tidying up inconsistencies and undisciplined work, here and there suggesting a line worth following.”<sup>13</sup> This was “art” talk. It envisioned improvement as its own reward, implying art for its own sake.

Others were prepared to go further. Ned Rorem (b. 1923), an American composer with the reputation of a specialist in art songs, faithful to the prewar American “pastoralist” idiom and therefore suffering a loss of prestige in the heyday of academic serialism, contributed an essay, “The Music of The Beatles,” to the *New York Review of Books*, a highbrow literary weekly, early in 1968. It opened with a calculated shock—“I never go to classical concerts anymore, and I don’t know anyone who does”<sup>14</sup>—and went on from there to settle a bunch of old scores.

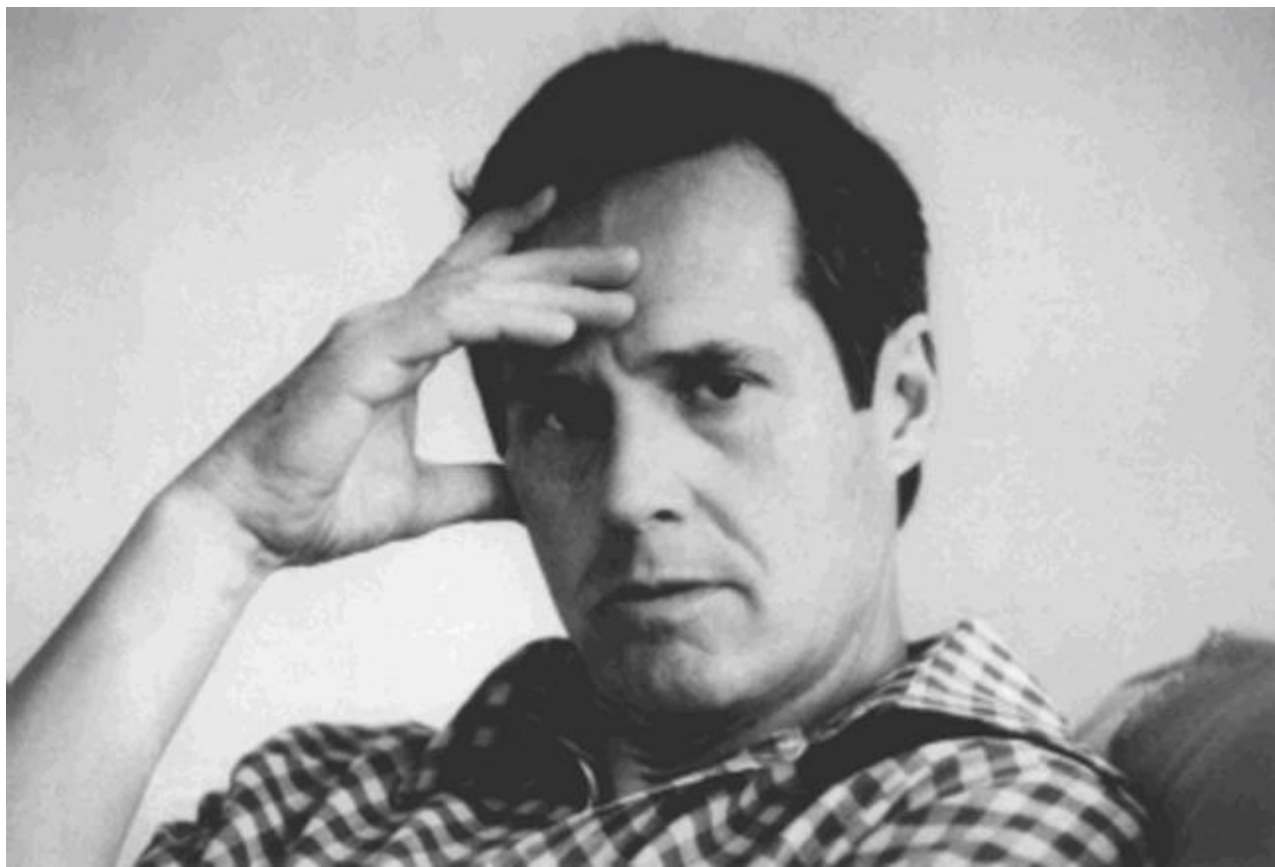


fig. 7-6 Ned Rorem in 1968.

For Rorem, the Beatles were a resurgence of genuine musical creativity after the long drought inflicted by the postwar avant-garde. Significantly, given the ethos of the sixties, “it is not through the suave innovations of our sophisticated composers that music is regaining health, but from the old-fashioned lung exercise of gangs of kids.”<sup>15</sup> Rorem dismissed Nat Hentoff’s complaint: “That the best of these gangs should have come from England is unimportant; they could have come from Arkansas.” The important thing was the very opposite of what Hentoff (and most rock ‘n’ roll enthusiasts) thought it was. “Our need for them,” Rorem insisted, “is neither sociological nor new, but artistic and old, specifically a *renewal*, a renewal of pleasure.” Referring to the “new sensibility” proclaimed in literature by critics like Susan Sontag (1933–2004), who had recently published a book of essays, *Against Interpretation* (1966), calling for “an erotics of art”<sup>16</sup> to replace the intellectualism of the avant-garde, Rorem accused contemporary music of lagging the way music had always lagged: “All other arts in the past decade have to an extent felt this renewal; but music was not only the last of man’s ‘useless’ expressions to develop historically, it is also the last to evolve within any given generation—even when, as today, a generation endures a maximum of five years (that brief span wherein ‘the new sensibility’ was caught).”<sup>17</sup> The secret of the Beatles, according to Rorem, was the secret of all good music: good tunes, leavened with what Rorem pretentiously dubbed “the Distortion of Genius.” Like many others, Rorem pointed to the unexpected harmonies that spiced the music, attributed by some to the influence of folk music, by others to the Beatles’ unschooled amateurism. But his prime example was “A Day in the Life,” in which “crushing poetry” is “intoned to the blandest of tunes.” Rorem compared this with the ironic strategies of modern dance, citing the choreography of Martha Graham (“she gyrates hysterically to utter silence, or stands motionless while all hell breaks loose in the pit”<sup>18</sup>). But “because The Beatles pervert with naturalness they usually build solid structures, whereas their rivals pervert with affectation, aping the gargoyles but not the cathedral.”

Where William Mann had allowed himself a specific reference to Mahler and an implicit one to Schubert, Rorem

went overboard with comparisons, calling upon Monteverdi, Ives, Poulenc, Ravel, Stravinsky, Bartók, Hindemith, and finally, inevitably, Mozart:

The Beatles's superiority, of course, is finally as elusive as Mozart's to [Muzio] Clementi [1752–1832, a once-famous English composer and pianist of Italian birth, probably chosen because readers of the *New York Review* were likely to have played his much-assigned sonatinas as children]: they spoke skilfully the same tonal language, but only Mozart spoke it with the added magic of genius. Who will define such magic?<sup>19</sup>

And this was his conclusion, tinged at once with nostalgia and with cold-war anxiety:

If (and here's a big if) music at its most healthy is the creative reaction of, and stimulation for, the body, and at its most decadent is the creative reaction of and stimulation of the intellect—if, indeed, health is a desirable feature of art, and if, as I believe, The Beatles exemplify this feature, then we have reached (strange though it may seem as coincidence with our planet's final years) a new and golden renaissance of song.<sup>20</sup>

It is easy enough to see what Rorem was trying to accomplish in this hyperbolic essay. It was an obvious “co-option,” an attempt to use the Beatles as a weapon in his own battle of revenge with the academic avant-garde. The most direct sally came in a parenthesis, an attempt to preempt and neutralize the predictable defenses of his highbrow readers against the incursion of popular culture into their domain:

There *are* still people who exclaim: “What's a nice musician like you putting us on about The Beatles for?” They are the same who at this late date take theater more seriously than movies and go to symphony concerts because pop insults their intelligence, unaware that the situation is now precisely reversed.<sup>21</sup>

In effect, Rorem was issuing an invitation to the concertgoing public to defect. And the invitation was heeded, very likely well beyond Rorem's expectation or wish. The late 1960s were precisely the time when sociological surveys stopped showing university students switching their taste allegiances as a matter of course, as a normal part of the “maturing” process. Henceforth, that rite of passage would no longer be required. From this point on, popular music was seen increasingly as part of an “alternative culture” to which not just hippies but educated people of all stripes, even “intellectuals,” could adhere.

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## Notes:

(8) Quoted in Allan Kozinn, *The Beatles* (London: Phaidon, 1995), p. 74.

(9) Ian MacDonald, *Revolution in the Head: The Beatles' Records and the Sixties* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), p. 15.

(10) Kozinn, *The Beatles*, p. 159.

(11) William Mann, “The Beatles Revive Hopes of Progress in Pop Music,” *The Times*, 29 May 1967; *The Lennon Companion*, p. 89.

(12) *Ibid.*, pp. 91–92.

(13) *Ibid.*, p. 93.

(14) Ned Rorem, “The Music of the Beatles,” in *The Lennon Companion*, p. 99.

(15) *Ibid.*, p. 104.

(16) Susan Sontag, "Against *Interpretation*" (1964), in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Delta Books, 1967), p. 14.

(17) Rorem, "The Music of the Beatles," in *The Lennon Companion*, p. 104.

(18) *Ibid.*, p. 105.

(19) *Ibid.*, p. 106.

(20) *Ibid.*, p. 109.

(21) *Ibid.*, p. 100.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

See also from Grove Music Online

Rock

Progressive rock

The Beatles

## ROCK 'N' ROLL BECOMES ROCK

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 7 The Sixties

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

That alternative culture was located at first in “alternative media,” shoestring newspapers and magazines that began proliferating in the mid-sixties to serve the counterculture and the protest movement as the two began drawing closer together, and to provide an alternative source of information and opinion, uncorrupted by commercial or “official” constraint. The first—*The Los Angeles Free Press* (1964) and the *Berkeley Barb* (1965)—appeared in California. *The East Village Other*, the paradigm alternative journal, started publication in New York in October 1965, and then came a deluge: *Rolling Stone* (1967), *Rat* (1968), and many others. All of these publications featured music criticism—serious criticism, of a kind formerly reserved only for classical music and, less often, jazz—evaluating and explicating the music deemed relevant to their clientele: the loosely defined genre of pop that around 1966 took the name “rock.”

Rock was not merely an abbreviation of rock ‘n’ roll, although that was obviously its derivation. Rather, it designated music consciously composed and performed as part of that combined counterculture/protest movement that the alternative press addressed. That music now traced its lineage only indirectly to the rural or working-class African-American sources that nourished rock ‘n’ roll. The counterculture was not listening to Elvis. The direct ancestor was the British wave, and the immediate model was *Sgt. Pepper*. This meant that rock was a music created and performed by white musicians, largely for an audience that was white and bourgeois (however antibourgeois its posture). Although it celebrated the voluntary poverty of the counterculture and the high idealism of protest, it was the product and expression of a moneyed and materialistic segment of society, as betokened above all by the emphasis it placed on high technology.

On this basis, the British sociologist Arthur Marwick has described the rock scene between 1966 and 1975 as an expression of financial elitism that justified itself by paying lip service to themes of social amelioration while enjoying the benefits of affluence in the form of expensive drugs and the even more expensive sound systems it now took to get the full effect of rock records.<sup>22</sup> The bands that arose in emulation of the post-*Sgt. Pepper* Beatles were also bound to make large financial outlays. As the investment in electronics technology became more critical, the more attenuated became the connection between rock and the original sources of rock ‘n’ roll, and the more pop aspired to the prestige of art. Thus the alternative culture became a meeting ground of art and entertainment categories formerly pigeonholed categorically as high and low. This was the first symptom, in the sphere of art and entertainment, of what is now called postmodernity.

On the pop side of the ledger, the kind of upward “sociostylistic” mobility associated with Gershwin's “symphonic jazz” resurfaced. In his 1967 review of *Sgt. Pepper*, William Mann noted with approval the attempt to unify the whole album around a recurrent theme that involved musical reprises. The unity, he allowed, was loose and “slightly specious,” but eminently “worth pursuing.”<sup>23</sup> He confidently predicted that “sooner or later some group will take the next logical step and produce an LP which is a popsong-cycle, a Tin Pan Alley *Dichterliebe*.” Although his terminology was excruciatingly out of date, Mann was on the mark. To strive for

larger statements than a pop single could allow became a prime characteristic of British and American rock. In 1969, the Who exactly fulfilled Mann's prediction with an album, *Tommy*, in which the constituent songs—all composed by lead guitarist Pete Townshend (b. 1945)—were linked in a continuous sequence describing the life of a “deaf dumb and blind boy” with a genius for playing pinball machines, whose success makes him a role model for underdogs everywhere. Although it was in fact a narrative song cycle, *Tommy* was promoted as “the first rock opera.” Eventually it was adapted for stage production, and even (very gaudily) for the movies. It became a milestone in the development of “progressive rock.” That term was borrowed from the “progressive jazz” of the 1950s, an esoteric and artistically ambitious outgrowth of bebop associated with the Beat poets. Progressive rock bands like Velvet Underground (from 1965) or Blood, Sweat, and Tears (from 1968) often included members with jazz and classical training. The trio Emerson, Lake, and Palmer (Keith Emerson [b. 1944] on keyboards, Greg Lake [b. 1948] on electric bass, Carl Palmer [b. 1951] on drums), widely regarded as the quintessential progressive rock band, specialized in arrangements of popular items from the classical repertoire like Musorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* (album released 1972) and Copland's *Fanfare for the Common Man* (single released 1972).

By the 1970s, there were even more “advanced” pop strains known as “art rock” and “avant-garde rock,” associated with individuals such as Frank Zappa (1940–93), Robert Fripp (b. 1946), and Brian Eno (b. 1948), and with groups like Queen (from 1971) and Talking Heads (from 1976). These musicians sought to subvert the “low” associations of rock ‘n’ roll with even more explicit appropriations from what the musicologist and rock historian Michael Long (borrowing the term from medieval rhetoric) calls “high expressive registers.”<sup>24</sup>

Queen's single “Bohemian Rhapsody” (1975) announces (and ironically joshes) these sociostylistic aspirations in its very title, as did the name of the album, *A Night at the Opera* (borrowed from a Marx Brothers film comedy), in which it was rereleased the next year. Mainly composed by the group's lead singer Freddie Mercury (1946–1991), it is a sort of seven-minute rock cantata (or “megason”) in three distinct movements, the product of upwards of 100 hours of studio work—a figure touted in promotion much the way Elliott Carter's 2,000 pages of sketches for his String Quartet no. 2 were touted. *A Night at the Opera* was advertised as “the most expensive album ever made,” recalling the way in which the RCA Mark II synthesizer had been touted when it was purchased for the Columbia-Princeton Electronic Music Center about a decade before, and it contains long strings of esoteric allusions like the one in Ex. 7-4. The song was never performed live. For promotional purposes a prerecorded videotape was prepared, in which the members of the band “lip-synched” the lyrics to accompany the original single on the soundtrack.



Allegretto tempo (♩ = ♩)

I see a lit - tle sil - hou - et - to of a man. Scar - a - mouche, Scar - a - mouche, will you do the Fan - dan - go. Thun - der - bolt and light - ning, ver - y, ver - y fright - ning me. Gal - li - le - o, Gal - li - le - o, Gal - li - le - o, Gal - li - le - o, Gal - li - le - o, Gal - li - le - o, Gal - li - le - o fig - a - ro Mag - ni - fi - co.

(let ring -----)

ex. 7-4 Freddie Mercury, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, A-major section

These overtures met with a strong response from some “classical” musicians, perhaps strongest among certain “unaffiliated” or nonacademic sectors of the avant-garde. Luciano Berio, whose music had previously been a stimulus for Paul McCartney (as Berio may or may not have been aware), welcomed the developments that had transformed rock ‘n’ roll into rock as early as the summer of 1967 in an essay (“Commenti al Rock”) that appeared in the *Nuova Rivista Musicale Italiana*, then Italy’s most prestigious musicological journal. Berio’s article effectively—imperialistically?—reclaimed rock for the European tradition. “It is remarkable,” he started off by observing, “that the phenomenon of rock (whose origins can be found in American popular music) needed an English group, The Beatles, in order to burst into full flower.” The next paragraph explained just what “full flower” entailed:

Rock as it is at present in the USA (above all in California) and in England (above all in The Beatles' records) represents an escape from the restrictions of its stylistic origins, a tribute to the liberating forces of eclecticism. The musical eclecticism which characterizes its present physiognomy is not a fragmentary and imitative impulse and it has nothing in common with the spent residue of abused and stereotyped forms—which are still identifiable as rock and roll. Rather, it is dictated by an impulse to accept and include and—using rather rudimentary musical means—to integrate the (simplified) idea of a multiplicity of traditions. With the exception of the beat, loud and often unvaried, all its musical characteristics seem sufficiently open to allow for every possible influence and event to be absorbed.<sup>25</sup>

There is always a whiff of patronization when a sophisticate like Berio admires “freshness,” “naturalness,” or “spontaneity,” the rock virtues he singled out for praise, and more than a whiff when he remarks that “one of the most seductive aspects of rock vocal style is, in fact, that there is no style.”<sup>26</sup> A very old-fashioned neoprimitivism shows through when Berio detects in rock the “Utopia of a return to origins,” or when he celebrates the “purity” of its instrumentation. When a rock band imports “foreign” sounds, he marvels, it always purifies them. In rock, “the sound of the trumpet, for example, is always simple and spare, without mutes or special effects, as in a painting by Grandma Moses: its sound is either baroque or Salvation Army.” The essay concludes with the wry observation that “the ‘decadent’ sound of trumpets played with mutes would be the signal that the moment for Rock at the Philharmonic has arrived; I sincerely hope that this moment will never come.”<sup>27</sup> Concern for the authenticity of the other is a traditional imperialist (or “ghettoizing”) concern. Some might detect a parallel if somewhat contradictory implication of racism (though surely not consciously intended) in a white European's celebration of rock's “escape” from its origins in African-American culture.

But it is clear, withal, that Berio was genuinely impressed by rock's absorption of high technology, even envious of it. It put rock “ahead” of contemporary developments in classical music, and that was the highest criterion of value that a classical avant-gardist knew. “Microphones, amplifiers and loudspeakers,” he wrote, “become not only extensions of the voices and instruments but become instruments themselves, overwhelming at times the original acoustic qualities of the sound source.”<sup>28</sup> Rock held the promise of a true integration of the electronic and acoustic in a performed music—a problem that (as we saw in chapter 4) the avant-garde (including Berio) had had some trouble solving.

The beginnings of academic respectability attached to rock at around the same time, and this was perhaps the ultimate portent of change. It can be read clearly, if only in retrospect, in “On the Music of the Beatles,” an essay by Joshua Rifkin (b. 1944), an eminent American musicologist and early-music conductor. It was written in 1968, when Rifkin was enrolled as a graduate student at Princeton University studying musicology with Arthur Mendel and composition with Milton Babbitt. (Earlier he had studied at Darmstadt with Stockhausen.) But it was not published until 1987 (in a retrospective anthology, *The Lennon Companion*), by which time Rifkin himself, in a trenchant preface, was able to put his own essay in a historical perspective.

The article lavished praise on the music of the Beatles for its “remarkable economy of means and organization,” and on the Beatles themselves for their “tight integrative control over detail,” the “tensile propulsive force” of their rhythm, their “complex textures,” their “unprecedented richness and structural depth.”<sup>29</sup> There was “the first popular music that not only sustains detailed analysis but even demands it.”<sup>30</sup> And Rifkin supplied in abundance what he thought the music demanded, backing up his assertions with musical examples and analytical charts of a kind habitually employed in classroom dissection of canonical texts (and by their very nature unintelligible to the artists whose products they sought to elucidate). The culminating argument was adapted from “Who Cares If You Listen,” Milton Babbitt's credo of the ivory tower, an unlikely source of praise for anything popular, perhaps, but a high authority in the eyes of the readers to whom Rifkin was addressing his arguments.

Writing in the late 1950s, Milton Babbitt stated that a popular song “would appear to retain its germane

characteristics under considerable alterations of register, rhythmic texture, dynamics, harmonic structure, timbre and other qualities.” Perhaps the most significant innovation of The Beatles—and one that has not yet received adequate attention—is that they have created a popular music that resembles “formal” or “serious” music in the relevance of every detail to the identity of the composition.<sup>31</sup>

If this was an argument that sought to insulate the music of the Beatles from the strictures of the academic elite, representing it as exceptional among popular musics rather than as an indication of what popular music had (or might) become, that is because, as Rifkin candidly and very perceptively pointed out in 1987, his article was “an attempt at justifying the Beatles in terms of a particular ideology and, in so doing, to encompass them safely within its boundaries.”<sup>32</sup> That was the ideology of academic modernism, “the heady blend of Schenker, Schoenberg and logical positivism once so prevalent in certain academic corners of the American musical landscape.” It did not allow Rorem's appeal to dumb “pleasure,” and so a more circuitous route to appreciation was necessary.

The article, in short, was an attempt to exorcise a threat that could not be openly acknowledged at the time, and that presaged a crisis. For, as Rifkin noted in hindsight, “anyone aware of such things” from the vantage point of 1987,

will also know how much the grip of that ideology has now slackened on even some of its most enthusiastic adherents. Ironically, for me, as for not a few of my friends and colleagues, The Beatles themselves played no little role in that slackening process. The very passion that we conceived for them provoked troubling questions: how could these musically unlettered kids, operating more or less collectively, produce something that we could see as somehow coterminous with the products of those fearsomely learned individuals who alone, we imagined, could create “serious art”? Faced with such contradictions, we could either abandon the passion, try to reconcile it with the aesthetic and other paradigms to which we knowingly and unknowingly subscribed, or start to wonder about the paradigms themselves. We couldn't do the first; for a while, as my article attests, some of us tried the second; but ultimately, and perhaps inevitably, most of us wound up with the third.<sup>33</sup>

Rifkin implied at the time that his was the first serious critical article on the Beatles, or on rock, since it was the first to use the methods of formal academic analysis. “Most criticism of pop music,” he alleged, “contents itself with breathless accounts of the writer's responses to the pop scene; critics who have attempted to deal with actual music usually betray a comprehension so severely limited as to obscure rather than clarify the subject at hand.”<sup>34</sup> But as he later attested, his recourse to analysis was a dodge. Rifkin, a skilled composer and arranger, paid a more direct sort of tribute to the Beatles with *The Baroque Beatles Book* (1965), a record of clever arrangements of Beatles' tunes in the form of fugues, keyboard variations, trio sonatas, and suite movements scored for a typical early-eighteenth-century “Bach” or “baroque” orchestra replete with continuo. It had a big sale among record collectors who, like Rifkin, were primarily committed to the classical canon but found the Beatles irresistible.

But as Rifkin surely knew, by the time he wrote his ultra-academic tribute to the Beatles a new breed of pop critic had emerged in the alternative press, and was even then beginning to infiltrate the mainstream media and the academy. These writers, while they often avoided “textualizing” the performances about which they wrote (thus remaining true to the “oral” processes of pop creation and dissemination, in which notation comes last, and serves only commercial purposes), nevertheless wrote as “serious” and even erudite critics, with a high awareness of history—both of the medium itself (in terms of styles and influences) and of its social and cultural environment—and an often superior grasp of sociology and cultural theory to ground their judgments.

Although they came to their profession during the heyday of rock's claim to intellectual status, their detailed knowledge and critical purview encompassed the earlier history of rock 'n' roll and its sources in folk music and

blues. They were able to draw previously unchronicled connections between those genres and between rock 'n' roll and earlier genres of American popular music both white and black, not only uncovering the true (and academically disreputable) historical sources of the styles that had begun to impress white educated audiences, but also establishing a popular-music canon (yes, pop "classics") that furthered the arrival of popular music studies as a legitimate branch of both musicology and cultural history.

The pioneer publication was *Crawdaddy!*, a mimeographed sheet with a press run of 500, founded in 1966 by Paul Williams, then a seventeen-year-old student at Swarthmore College. (By the end of 1968, when Williams sold it, it was a professionally printed magazine with a circulation of 25,000.) At first it consisted entirely of the editor-publisher's own musings. One such, a much-reprinted article called "How Rock Communicates," gave the flavor of the new pop criticism. It opened with a group of epigraphs that included one from Pete Townshend of the Who, and one from *Feeling and Form*, Susanne K. Langer's weighty treatise on aesthetics (quoted as an inspiration by Elliott Carter in chapter 6).

Another widely anthologized early essay from *Crawdaddy!*, later expanded into a book, was "The Aesthetics of Rock" by Richard Meltzer (then a philosophy student at the State University of New York at Stony Brook; among his teachers there was Allan Kaprow, the avant-garde artist associated in the late 1950s with "happenings"—see chapter 2). Meltzer's range of reference went from James Joyce to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* to Lennon and McCartney to the pop artist Andy Warhol to Bob Dylan and on to the analytical philosopher W. V. Quine. There is no whiff of neoprimitivism here. What these students were doing, clearly, was putting their response to popular music in touch with their other intellectual pursuits, something that would never have occurred to earlier generations of British or American students. It was at once an illustration of and a stimulus to the change in the patterns of consumption that so transformed popular music, and then all music, in the sixties.

Among the more professional breed of rock critic who fostered (and were fostered by) this change were Robert Christgau (b. 1942) and Greil Marcus (b. 1945). Christgau gained wide exposure as a columnist (1967–1969) for *Esquire*, a popular men's magazine, and then went to the *Village Voice*, a somewhat older, respectable counterpart to the alternative press of the sixties, where he eventually became a senior editor and reared a new generation of critics. Marcus became recordings editor of *Rolling Stone* in 1969, while pursuing a graduate degree in American studies at the University of California at Berkeley. He is the author of several scholarly books on American popular music, including *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music* (1975), which laid the foundation for the serious historical study of the genre.

A breakthrough was reached in 1970, when the *Los Angeles Times* hired Robert Hilburn (b. 1939) as a permanent staff critic after publishing occasional pieces of freelance rock criticism (by Hilburn and others) for four years. During Hilburn's tenure the paper developed the widest coverage of popular music of any American newspaper, where previously only the classical concert scene had been regularly reported in the daily press, reflecting the economic status and cultural interests of its presumed readership. The *New York Times* followed suit in 1974, when it hired John Rockwell (b. 1940), a Berkeley Ph.D. in German cultural history who was already covering classical music for the paper, as a permanent rock critic. (Later Rockwell served a term as general editor of the paper's Sunday Arts and Leisure section.) The incorporation of rock criticism on newspaper "culture" pages, all but universal by the end of the 1970s, was perhaps the most decisive symptom of the revolution the sixties had wrought in the patterns of musical consumption.

Rockwell's *All American Music: Composition in the Late Twentieth Century* (1983) was another symptom. It was the first "synchronic" survey to treat the whole spectrum of musical activity within a nation at a certain moment in its history in what became known as "multicultural" terms, implying a studied avoidance of hierarchy and an equally studied eschewal of norms. Rockwell's twenty chapters covered everything from "The Northeastern Academic Establishment" (with Milton Babbitt the focus) to Broadway musicals to art-rock, black "soul" music, and "Latino" pop, not just in an effort to paint a musical portrait of American society, but also to identify and communicate the value of each musical manifestation, however controversial.

## Notes:

- (22) See Arthur Marwick, *British Society since 1945* (London: Pelican Books, 1982), p. 128.
- (23) Mann, "The Beatles Revive Hopes," in *The Lennon Companion*, p. 93.
- (24) Michael P. Long, "Is This the Real Life? Rock Classics and Other Inversions," University of California at Berkeley musicology colloquium, 1998.
- (25) Luciano Berio, "Comments on Rock," *Nuova Rivista Musicale Italiana*, May/June 1967; *The Lennon Companion*, p. 97.
- (26) *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- (27) *Ibid.*, p. 99.
- (28) *Ibid.*, pp. 97–98.
- (29) Joshua Rifkin, "On the Music of the Beatles," in *The Lennon Companion*, p. 116ff.
- (30) *Ibid.*, p. 126.
- (31) *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- (32) *The Lennon Companion*, p. 113.
- (33) *Ibid.*, pp. 113–14.
- (34) Rifkin, "On the Music of the Beatles," in *The Lennon Companion*, p. 115.
- Citation (MLA):** Richard Taruskin. "Chapter 7 The Sixties." *The Oxford History of Western Music*. Oxford University Press. New York, USA. n.d. Web. 13 Mar. 2011.  
<<http://www.oxfordwesternmusic.com/view/Volume5/actrade-9780195384857-div1-007005.xml>>.
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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

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[Bob Dylan](#)

[Miles Davis](#)

## FUSION

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 7 The Sixties

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

This fusion of purviews in a single critical patchwork was inspired by rock, or rather by rock's success in overthrowing social hierarchies as expressed in music. Rock as a democratizing force had strong repercussions within all other fields of musical production, influencing all of the genres (folk, jazz, classical) that had formerly been considered alien or antithetical (in a word, superior) to the commercial pop scene. The influence of rock as a democratizing or leveling force on these other genres produced furious controversies. In particular, it inspired backlashes from those interested in insulating or protecting the "authenticity" of the non-pop genres from commercial contamination.

The infiltration of "folk" began with covers. In 1965, a band called the Byrds recorded Bob Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man," the anthem of the drug counterculture, with amplified instruments and a heavy dance beat, and sold a million copies, many times more than Dylan's original recording. Three years later they began giving songs by Dylan, Pete Seeger, and even Woody Guthrie (1912–67), the left-leaning patriarch of the folk scene and Dylan's mentor, the full high-tech electronic studio treatment. That much was legitimate business.

But when Dylan himself took up the use of electrically amplified instruments, many of his fans regarded it as an act of betrayal. He was heckled at the Newport Folk Festival in the summer of 1965 and actually booed the following year while touring in England. A serious motorcycle accident later in 1966 caused a lengthy withdrawal from live performance, during which time he forswore the rock influence and went back to acoustic instruments. (The songs he recorded during this period—the "basement tapes" as they are called—have become cult classics.) But as many sensed at Newport, including Pete Seeger and the folk song collector Alan Lomax, who, according to a durable legend, together tried backstage to sever Dylan's power cables with an ax, Dylan's defection doomed pure "folk" as a genre with a mass following.

"Within a year," Greil Marcus has written, "Dylan's performance would have changed all the rules of folk music—or, rather, what had been understood as folk music would as a cultural force have all but ceased to exist."<sup>35</sup> All the "folk" singers who grew up along with Dylan—Joni Mitchell; Peter, Paul, and Mary—had to convert to a rock style or face effective extinction. Resistance and resentment, at first, were as much social as musical. To the folk elite, as Mike Bloomfield, Dylan's lead guitarist at Newport, testified in retrospect, "rock was greasers, heads, dancers, people who got drunk and boogied"<sup>36</sup>—that is, people who didn't know how to dress or behave at concerts, and who used illicit substances.



fig. 7-7 Miles Davis, 1960s.

Even greater controversy (because it entailed race among its social issues) surrounded the jazz-rock fusions that began to take place at the end of the 1960s. Again, it was the perceived “defection” of a universally acknowledged “great” that brought matters to a head. Miles Davis (1926–91) was one of the leaders, in the late 1940s, in the rise of bebop, jazz’s most esoteric and individualist (that is, modernist) phase. As such, he was conspicuous within the jazz faction most self-consciously concerned with the identity of their music as an art form, as distinct from entertainment. Davis acted the role of artist, “disinterestedly” concerned with beauty rather than interested in fame or fortune, with special vehemence, even going so far as to play at times with his back to the audience and leave the stage without acknowledging applause. But he was also, in the words of the critic Barry Kernfeld (writing in the *New Grove Dictionary of American Music*), “the most consistently innovative musician in jazz from the late 1940s through the 1960s,”<sup>37</sup> which also reflected his voraciously modernist bent.

It created a dilemma for his admirers, therefore, when Davis's questing spirit led him, beginning in 1968, to collaborate with "sidemen" or accompanying artists who played electric keyboards and guitars, and drummers who backed his improvisations with a heavy rock beat, an *alla breve* beat that seemed like jazz at half speed, subdivided (to compound the transgression) equally rather than into the swinging "jazz eighths" rhythm that for many was the indispensable hallmark of true jazz. Two Miles Davis albums, *In a Silent Way* and *Bitches Brew*, lit a fire of debate that even two decades later had not died down. As late as 1990, the African-American jazz critic Stanley Crouch pronounced a ringing anathema on them in *The New Republic*, a journal of opinion mainly read by the white liberal establishment:

And then came the fall. *In a Silent Way*, in 1969, long, maudlin, boasting, Davis's sound mostly lost among electronic instruments, was no more than droning wallpaper music. A year later, with *Bitches Brew*, Davis was firmly on the path of the sellout. It sold more than any other Davis album, and fully launched jazz rock with its multiple keyboards, electronic guitars, static beats, and clutter. Davis's music became progressively trendy and dismal. His albums of recent years prove beyond any doubt that he has lost all interest in music of quality.<sup>38</sup>

There is no need to make a musical test of these claims, because it is clear that the complaint is not musical but social. It is the very presence of rock (embodied in its "electronic" instrumentarium) that is decried, in a strangely inverted replay of the original fear of transgression or "cultural miscegenation," now manifested from the black perspective. Despite its roots in R&B, rock was since the British invasion irrevocably identified as a white genre, and its infestation of jazz was regarded, in the words of the playwright and black nationalist Amiri Baraka (originally named LeRoi Jones, b. 1934), as a "desouling process."<sup>39</sup> When, finally, a white jazz critic, John Litweiler, seconded the rhetoric, and made it even more pointed (comparing the new Davis sound to "the enduring, debilitated stimulation of a three-day drunk on white port wine"<sup>40</sup>), the cult of authenticity took on a familiar colonialist tinge. Jazz-rock fusion, it was argued, appealed mainly to the rock audience, namely middle-class, educated whites, and was therefore inauthentic. (But by then, "pure" jazz was also playing chiefly to a white audience, ironically enough, even if it was performed by blacks.) The main difference, and it was a big difference, was in the size of the audience, not its racial complexion. The underlying issue, as usual, was commercial appeal, and the mixed scorn and envy that it inspired.

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## Notes:

(35) Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), p. 13.

(36) Quoted in Marcus, *Invisible Republic*, p. 14.

(37) Barry Kernfeld, "Davis, Miles (Dewey, III)," in *New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, Vol. I (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 585.

(38) Stanley Crouch, "Play the Right Thing," *The New Republic*, 12 February 1990, p. 35.

(39) Quoted in Gary Tomlinson, "Cultural Dialogics and Jazz: A White Historian Signifies," in *Disciplining Music: Musicology and Its Canons*, eds. Katherine Bergeron and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 83.

(40) *Ibid.*, p. 79.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

See also from Grove Music Online

Jazz-rock fusion

Gunther Schuller

Third Stream

## INTEGRATION WITHOUT PREJUDICE?

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 7 The Sixties

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

Unlike “folk,” which never recovered its pure identity after the infusion of rock, jazz (or rather, some eminent jazz musicians) recoiled from “fusion” into a purism comparable to that of academic modernism. This recoil mirrored a larger one within American society. The “melting pot” ideal that saw America as a land offering equal opportunity to all who were willing to shed their ethnic particularities and assimilate (or “integrate”) into the general culture was now widely questioned by minorities and vocally rejected by some of their spokesmen. In its place, many now embraced the principle of multiculturalism (or, in its more strident variants, cultural nationalism), a far less sanguine view that expressed the disillusion of those who, during the turbulent decade of civil-rights violence, concluded that the melting-pot or integrationist ideal was a smokescreen concealing and protecting the interests of the existing white (and Christian, and male) power structure.

The movement toward integration had received its biggest boost in 1954, when the United States Supreme Court, in deciding a case called *Brown v. Board of Education*, ruled unanimously that racially segregated schools were unconstitutional because separate facilities, excluding minorities from the majority “mainstream,” stigmatized the excluded and were therefore inherently incompatible with the constitution's guarantees of legal equality for all citizens. That moment had its musical reflections. One, it could be argued, was the success of Elvis Presley, a white performer who frankly emulated a black style (but without the degrading camouflage of blackface makeup). Another was the so-called Third Stream.

The term, and to a large extent the music to which it referred, was the brainchild of Gunther Schuller (b. 1925), a remarkably versatile musician who began his career as a French horn virtuoso (occupying the solo horn chair in the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra from 1945 to 1959), who composed prolifically (chiefly in a serial idiom), and who maintained an enthusiastic interest in jazz that led him to become one of the major historians of the genre. Schuller coined the phrase in 1957 to denote (in his words) “a type of music which, through improvisation or written composition or both, synthesizes the essential characteristics and techniques of contemporary Western art music and various ethnic or vernacular musics.”<sup>41</sup>

It is a slightly misleading (and slightly patronizing) definition, since jazz was by 1957 far from a purely ethnic or vernacular music (nor, beyond its being written, could anyone have actually defined the “essence” of contemporary Western art music except contentiously). But the broadness of the definition reflected Schuller's ecumenical conviction, characteristic of its optimistic time, that “any music stands to profit from a confrontation with another.” The Third Stream was envisioned as the confluence of two “mainstreams.” “Western art music,” in Schuller's view, “can learn a great deal from the rhythmic vitality and ‘swing’ of jazz, while jazz can find new avenues of development in the large-scale forms and complex tonal systems of classical music.” In practice, the Third Stream was the fruit of a collaboration between Schuller and John Lewis (1920–2001), a jazz pianist and arranger who had studied theory and composition at the Manhattan School of Music and who was already interested in reconciling jazz techniques both with the larger forms of literate composition

and with modernist structural ideals. Even his improvisations, in the words of one critic, had “a degree of motivic unity that is rare in jazz.”<sup>42</sup> In 1951, Lewis teamed up with the vibraphonist Milt Jackson (1923–99) in the Milt Jackson Quartet (the remaining players being a bassist and a drummer), which the next year was renamed the Modern Jazz Quartet (MJQ) under Lewis's direction. The MJQ quickly gained a reputation as a “progressive” ensemble, whose refined and somewhat cerebral signature sound (sometimes identified as “cool jazz”) was a florid counterpoint between Jackson's solos and Lewis's unusually melodic accompaniments.

It was on the basis of this already somewhat “classically” oriented, hence devernacularized (and despite all the members' being African-American, de-ethnicized) jazz approach that Schuller, who as a twelve-tone composer employed a similarly devernacularized idiom, developed the Third Stream idea. He promoted it in terms that unabashedly proclaimed the values, and even the slogans, associated with the liberal integrationist moment in American social policy:

Third Stream is a way of composing, improvising, and performing that brings musics together rather than segregating them. It is a way of making music which holds that *all musics are created equal*, coexisting in a beautiful brotherhood/sisterhood of musics that complement and fructify each other. It is a global concept which allows the world's musics—written, improvised, handed-down, traditional, experimental—to come together, to learn from one another, to reflect human diversity and pluralism. It is the music of rapprochement, of *entente*—not of competition and confrontation. And it is the logical outcome of the American melting pot: *E pluribus unum*.<sup>43</sup>

For an idea of Third Stream music in practice we can compare a composition by Schuller with one by Lewis. Schuller's *Transformation* (1957) is composed for a jazz combo precisely matching the instrumentation of the MJQ, plus an ensemble of orchestral instruments (winds and harp). This is Schuller's program note:

In *Transformation* a variety of musical concepts converge: twelve-tone technique, *Klangfarbenmelodie* (tone-color-melody), jazz improvisation, and metric breaking up of the jazz beat. In regard to the latter, rhythmic asymmetry has been a staple of classical composers' techniques since the early part of the twentieth century (particularly in the music of Stravinsky and Varèse), but in jazz in the 1950s it was still an extremely rare occurrence. As the title suggests, the work begins as a straight twelve-tone piece, with the melody parceled out among an interlocking chain of tone colors, and is gradually transformed into a jazz piece by the subtle introduction of jazz-rhythmic elements. Jazz and improvisation take over, only to succumb to the reverse process: they are gradually swallowed up by a growing riff which then breaks up into smaller fragments, juxtaposing in constant alternation classical and jazz rhythms. Thus, the intention in this piece was never to fuse jazz and classical elements into a totally new alloy, but rather to present them initially in succession—in peaceful coexistence—and later, in close, more competitive juxtaposition.<sup>44</sup>

Musical score for the first system, featuring Tenor, Bass, Horn, Trumpet, Vibraphone, Piano, and Bass. The Tenor, Bass, Horn, and Trumpet parts are marked with *ppp*, *pp*, and *p*. The Vibraphone part has a *mf* dynamic. The Piano part shows chords: (Bb), (F7), (Bb), (Bb7), (Bb). The Bass part has a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The Percussion part is marked with a slash, indicating it is not played.

\*) From here on until [ ]  
2nd, 4th beat gradually  
more & more pronounced

Musical score for the second system, featuring Clarinet, Tenor, Bass, Horn, Trumpet, Vibraphone, Piano, Bass, and Percussion. The Clarinet part is marked with *mf*. The Tenor, Bass, Horn, and Trumpet parts are marked with *mf*. The Vibraphone part has a *mf* dynamic. The Piano part shows chords: (Bb), (F#m), (G-), (Gb7), (F7), (F7). The Bass part has a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The Percussion part is marked with a slash, indicating it is not played.

The image shows a musical score for a jazz ensemble. The instruments listed on the left are Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Tenor Saxophone (Ten.), Bassoon (Bn.), Horns (Hn.), Trombone (Tbn.), Harp (Hp.), Vibraphone (Vibes.), Piano (Pno.), Bass (Bass), and Percussion (Perc.). The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (mf, cresc., f), articulation (shake), and a key signature change (K). The Vibraphone part shows a sequence of chords: (Bb), (Cb7), (Bb), (F#7), (B), and (B7). The Percussion part is marked with "(etc. ad lib.)".

Fl.  
Cl.  
Ten.  
Bn.  
Hn.  
Trb.  
Hp.  
Vibes.  
Pno.  
Bass  
Perc.

Tom-toms  
Bass-Drum

*f* (wood sticks)

ex. 7-5 Gunther Schuller, *Transformation*, fig. [J] to fig. [L]

Ex. 7-5 shows the “reverse process” Schuller describes, in which the fully notated music of the “classical” instruments gradually swamps the partially notated music of the improvising combo. Lewis's *Sketch* (1959) pits the MJQ against a string quartet. The two groups share a fund of motivic elements (notably a short scale figure descending a minor third); but again, as in Schuller's piece, they alternate rather than collaborate, the “composed” music acting sometimes as a frame, sometimes as a harmonic background, for the improvised. Ex. 7-6 shows the end of the piece, the only moment that attempts the “integration” of all the performers in a single texture. Neither Schuller's piece nor Lewis's actually attempts, let alone achieves, the kind of integration or fusion that theoretical descriptions of Third Stream seem to promise. The idea of two indigenous musical currents meeting on absolute terms of equality was attractive to Americans. But in actual musical practice, Third Stream compositions left the crucial questions—were the currents truly indigenous? could they really

meet as equals?—unanswered, and the trend had effectively died out by the 1980s. Even in its brief heyday the idea met with considerable skepticism, especially after Schuller characterized Third Stream as “the Europeanization of jazz.”<sup>45</sup> This ill-starred term reactivated notions of upward social mobility, and not just for jazz.

Yet Third Stream never aroused the antagonism that jazz-rock fusion inspired; and that must be because the musics it sought to fuse—conservatory-style composition (in Schuller's case twelve-tone) and “progressive jazz”—were both of them considered elite musics at the time. The offspring born of their wedlock could be comfortably accommodated, in the context of the late 1950s and early 1960s, to the idea of “maturation of taste” as a rite of passage. Neither jazz nor classical listeners needed to fear that their elite status would be compromised by a taste for Third Stream.

The image displays a musical score for a string quartet and piano. The score is organized into two systems. The first system consists of four staves for Violin I (Vln.), Violin II (Vln.), Viola (Via.), and Violoncello (Vc.). The second system consists of five staves: Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Piano. The music is in 3/4 time and includes dynamic markings such as *f*, *mp*, and *cresc.* (crescendo). The piano part includes a 'Triangle' section and a 'pizz.' (pizzicato) section.

The image displays a musical score for the piece 'Sketch' by John Lewis. The score is arranged in two systems. The first system consists of five staves: four for a string quartet (Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Cello/Double Bass) and one for a piano. Each string staff begins with a trill (tr) and a dynamic marking of 'dim.' (diminuendo), which then transitions to 'p' (piano). The piano part also features a 'p' dynamic marking. The second system includes a drum set part with a snare drum and cymbal, followed by a vocal line in treble clef, a piano accompaniment in grand staff (treble and bass clefs), and a double bass line in bass clef. The double bass part includes an 'arco' (arco) marking. The score concludes with a double bar line.

ex. 7-6 John Lewis, *Sketch*, end

Jazz-rock fusion, on the other hand, was seen as part of a general encroachment of commercialism on art that practitioners and devotees of elite genres all saw at first as a mortal threat. Indeed, rock did seem to be swallowing up everybody's audience, and appeared to traditionalists of all stripes as the common enemy, even as it was claiming the allegiance of many who would previously have "graduated" to one of the traditional elite genres. By the end of the 1960s popular music accounted for more than 70 percent of all record sales, leaving jazz, folk, and classical to compete for the remainder. Since then the disparity has only grown. In the 1990s, classical music and jazz each commanded a measly 3 percent of record sales. They had become "niche" products. For classical music in particular, which had always claimed a universal "human" appeal (and founded its sense of superiority to other genres precisely on its vaunted universality), it seemed a death sentence. The history of classical music in the last three decades of the twentieth century was basically a history of coping with the threat put in motion by the sixties.

## Notes:

(41) Gunther Schuller, "Third Stream," in *New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, Vol. IV, p. 377.



(42) Thomas Owens, "Lewis, John (Aaron)," in *New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, Vol. III, p. 41.

(43) "Third Stream Revisited," in *Musings: The Musical Worlds of Gunther Schuller* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 119.

(44) *Musings*, pp. 131–32.

(45) "The Avant-Garde and Third Stream," *Musings*, p. 121.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

## See also from Grove Music Online

Hans Werner Henze

The Bassarids

Rolling Stones

Luciano Berio

## RADICAL CHIC

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 7 The Sixties

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

One of the ways one copes, of course, is to adapt. Since this book is a history of music in the literate or art tradition, “classical” adaptations and fusions with the popular will be the subject of a closer look in a separate chapter. They mainly originated in the English-speaking countries, the original breeding grounds of rock. But we can end this chapter with a look at a couple of continental European responses to the sixties and to its popular music. These took the form not of technical adaptation or stylistic appropriation, but of attitudinal conversion, the vaunted “revolution in the head.” One noteworthy response was Hans Werner Henze's. We last encountered Henze, in chapter 1, as a somewhat uneasy but obedient participant in the Darmstadt avant-garde. In despair over Germany's wartime descent into barbarism, and what he saw as the country's refusal to come to terms with the horrors of its past, Henze had emigrated in 1953 to Italy. There, without giving up commitment to his Schoenbergian technique (adopted as much in a spirit of political protest as of esthetic conviction), Henze strove for what his biographer Robert Henderson called “a fusion of the German and the Italian spirit, a projection of the north-German polyphonic temperament into the arioso south, with Bellini, Donizetti, Rossini and Verdi appearing as important influences.”<sup>46</sup> Not surprisingly, he became something of an opera specialist during this phase of his career, turning out six operas during his early Italian period.

The last of the six, *The Bassarids* (1965), was a long one-acter à la *Salome* or *Elektra*, set to a libretto by W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman, the same team that had furnished the words for Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* a decade and a half before. It is a retelling of Euripides's *Bacchae*, in which the calm domain of the abstemious and reasonable Pentheus, the King of Thebes, is invaded and destroyed by the wild followers of Dionysus, the god of wine. Despite the subject matter, Henze's opera is a rather cerebral work, its four big scenes cast (in a manner somewhat reminiscent of *Wozzeck*) as the four movements of a symphony.

As might be expected from someone who had made it his mission as an artist to warn against the return of Nazi irrationality—that “silly and self-regarding emotionalism, behind which it is impossible not to detect...something militantly nationalistic, something disagreeably heterosexual and Aryan”<sup>47</sup>—Henze portrayed the Dionysian revels harshly, as a brutal and wholly destructive force. “The occasional late Romantic exuberance that is found in my works is not intended to be exuberance as such but its anachronistic opposite,”<sup>48</sup> Henze wrote about *The Bassarids*. It is a perfect summary of the despairing irony that world war followed by cold war had produced.

*The Bassarids*, brilliantly staged, had a magnificent reception when it was unveiled at the Salzburg Festival, Europe's swankiest summer music venue; but after finishing the score, as he recounts in his autobiography, Henze felt a persistent malaise that rendered him emotionally numb through the whole autumn of 1965, preventing him from enjoying performances of his own music by others, or his own performances of his favorite music:

I remember conducting Mahler's First Symphony with the Berlin Philharmonic and can still recall my inner emptiness, a kind of apathy that constantly plagued me, so that everything I touched or attempted to touch went wrong. It was a feeling that I was unable to shake off, not only on this pointless, dispiriting evening at the Philharmonic but also in my private dealings with my fellow human beings. Everything felt joyless and uninspired.<sup>49</sup>

And then he heard the Rolling Stones. The occasion was the band's Rome debut, on New Year's Eve, 31 December 1965, at the Piper's Club, a big barn of a building that had been outfitted and equipped for rock concerts. In a memoir, Henze describes his encounter with the Stones as an epiphany:

They made an enormous impression on me, and for weeks I tried to reproduce this impression in my own music, but without success. The technique is entirely different. For the time being we must accept this fact, but whether it will be so forever is another question. To me it seems important and desirable that Pop Music should be brought into contact with "our kind," which is so much older and more difficult: the contact could be of value to both sides. One day the difference will be entirely done away with.<sup>50</sup>

In an essay written some time later Henze elaborated the point:

In the course of the development of music I can even see, or rather sense, possibilities that complex orchestral or symphonic music will move in a direction where it will all of a sudden come upon pop music. It could come about one day that the difference will disappear between *musique savante* and the music that young people enjoy so much.<sup>51</sup>

It is especially noteworthy that this sentence, so subversive of every modernist assumption, appeared in an article called "Musik ist nolens volens politisch"—Music Is Willy-Nilly Political (that is, political whether or not it wants to be). The initial reaction of pleasure, not far in spirit from Ned Rorem's eulogy to the Beatles, had metamorphosed with Henze into a discourse of radical egalitarian politics, paralleling the coming together of the counterculture and political activism. Henze was soon caught up in the leftist politics of the German student movement.

The overtly (and angrily) political music that he wrote during his period of friendship, beginning in 1967, with violent "new leftists" like Rudi Dutschke, the leader of the German Student Socialist League (a counterpart to the American organization Students for a Democratic Society), quickly regained the alienated and alienating—grating and ugly—edge associated with the modernist avant-garde. A truer memento of Henze's initial encounter with rock was a work called *Musen Siziliens* ("The muses of Sicily"), a "Concerto for chorus, two pianos, wind instruments and timpani on fragments from the Eclogues of Vergil," composed in the early months of 1966 under the direct impact of the Rolling Stones.

Henze had received a commission for a work suitable for amateur choruses to sing. He connected that requirement with the new aims that rock had inspired in him. He went quite out on a limb for an elite modernist, "employing utterly simple formulas, with the music circling around single notes and tonal centers, so that it would be enjoyable to sing, even for amateur choirs, and the playing of the two solo piano parts should be fun both for pianists and audience."<sup>52</sup> Putting that simple gratification together with texts from classical poetry sounds like a prescription for just the sort of neoprimitivist music—Carl Orff's, for example—that had been shamelessly exploited by the Nazis, and that the postwar avant-garde had denounced for (it seemed) the best of reasons.

But somehow the Rolling Stones erased that sinister parallel, at least temporarily, from Henze's consciousness. The rock group had, ironically enough, the very same effect on him that the Bacchantes had on poor King Pentheus, according to the cautionary tale that Henze had just retold in *The Bassarids*. He did not go all the way

to Orff for a model, but he did come up with a music reminiscent of some of Stravinsky's later neoclassical works, in particular a couple of lively pastoral pieces called *Eclogues* (one in the 1932 *Duo concertante* for violin and piano, the other the middle movement of his 1943 *Ode* for orchestra) that also evoked Virgilian poetry. These must have been among Henze's conscious models (along with Satie, whom, Henze wrote, "in making myself over into a beginner again I happened on as if on an old acquaintance"<sup>53</sup>).

The third movement of *Musen Siziliens* is called Silenus, after the leader of the satyrs, and sets a text from Vergil that depicts an antique version of the scene that Henze had witnessed, and been so thrilled by, on the night of 31 December 1965. "Then he began to sing," the text begins:

and no more was said. And now a miracle—you might have seen the Fauns and the wild creatures dance lightly to the tune and stubborn oak-trees wave their heads.

Rocky Parnassus is not so deeply moved by the music of Apollo; Ismarus and Rhodope have never known such ecstasy when Orpheus sang.

ex. 7-7 Hans Werner Henze, *Musen Siziliens*, III (Silenus), mm. 108–11

The music certainly lives up to Henze's description, reaching climaxes on C-major arpeggios (Ex. 7-7) and a blazing C-major conclusion that might have made Orff blush. This was modernist high treason, and Henze was excoriated for it in the modernist press. Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt (1901–88), Schoenberg's first biographer, who was now a professor of music history at the Technical University of Berlin and the most authoritative critic in the city, muttered that the piece contained several passages "that could no longer be described as modern" in a review that carried the headline, "Henze Turns the Clock Back."<sup>54</sup> Thirty years later, Henze made this retort in his autobiography:

Did people really think me capable of such a strong-man act, I wondered? Which clock did Stuckenschmidt mean? And how late was it anyway? In the hearts of so many people at this time there still existed this *esprit de corps* that demanded that every deviation from the officially prescribed rules and regulations that were dictated by curiously structuralist progressive thinking and that were applied to both life and art with equal rigor had to be denounced and punished without a moment's delay. But who was in charge of this organization? Who set the standards? Pierre [Boulez]? Or the frightful Heinrich Strobel [the new-music impresario; see chapter 4]? A kangaroo court? A central committee, a shady academy somewhere,

in Darmstadt perhaps? No, that really was inconceivable. But why, in heaven's name, did people not slowly get used to seeing and accepting artistic objects for what they are, namely, as independent creatures with lives of their own? That would at least have been a beginning.<sup>55</sup>

Ultimately, then, the encounter with rock had nudged Henze away from the view that placed artists and artworks in a determined historical sequence. He would henceforth see himself, and would try to get others to see themselves, as not just living in history. A passage from “Musik ist nolens volens politisch,” meanwhile, went the rest of the way and asserted that artworks and artists exist first, and most essentially, in a social network. Looking forward to “the liberation of art from its commercialization,” Henze made some Utopian predictions:

I visualize the disappearance of the musical elite and of globetrotting virtuosi; the overcoming of all this ideology of stardom in music, which I regard as a relic from the previous century and as a *maladie de notre temps*. It would mean that the composer is no longer a star, as today, but an *uomo sociale* [a social being], someone who learns and teaches. He would be someone who shows other people how to compose; I could envisage composing becoming something that all people can do, simply by taking away their inhibitions. I think there is no such thing as an unmusical person.<sup>56</sup>

These are the somewhat utopian ideas that in the 1970s and 1980s were often pigeonholed as “postmodernist,” and that received their most conspicuous summary in a tract by the French cultural theorist Jacques Attali called *Bruits* (1977; translated into English as *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*). Henze's was a remarkably early formulation, brought on by an unexpectedly overwhelming encounter with British rock in the mid-sixties. The final irony is that by the 1990s, when he wrote his autobiography, Henze suppressed (or repressed) that aspect of his esthetic odyssey; neither rock nor the Rolling Stones are mentioned in that book in connection with *Musen Siziliens*. (The quotations given above come from Henze's program note to the first recording, made when the piece was new). But these vagaries will be something to trace in the final chapters of this book.

Perhaps the emblematic response to the sixties on the part of what was by now becoming the senior generation of the European avant-garde was *Sinfonia*, a sprawling composition for eight amplified solo voices and orchestra in four movements (later expanded to five), composed in 1968, the “year of the barricades,” by Luciano Berio, whose bemused, somewhat patronizing tribute to rock and to “the liberating forces of eclecticism” that the new popular music had unleashed is already familiar to us. *Sinfonia* (to be pronounced, Berio has said, with the accent on the second syllable, rather than the third as in ordinary Italian) was one of a group of commissions issued by the New York Philharmonic in connection with its 125th anniversary in 1967; this explains why English is the dominating language of the texts.

The idea of “fusion” was embedded at *Sinfonia*'s core. The virtuoso voice parts were composed for the Swingle Singers, a vocal octet founded by the American conductor Ward Swingle (b. 1927) to perform a “crossover” repertoire that encompassed everything from Renaissance madrigals to arrangements of current pop songs. Their most successful recording, “Bach's Greatest Hits,” was a lively and impressively pitch-perfect recital of Bach keyboard pieces sung to the accompaniment of a jazz rhythm section (bass and traps) in the “scat” style popularized by jazz singers who vied with instrumentalists by improvising to meaningless syllables (or “vocables”). Especially in the fifth and last movement of the revised *Sinfonia*, Berio exploited their near-incredible agility and accuracy.

The texts enunciated in the previous movements already constituted a wildly eclectic collage. Much of the time the singers vocalized on vowels or other phonemes, in the fashion of much avant-garde music that explored the soft edge dividing (or connecting) music and language. Against this background of primal lingual soup the first movement pits readings from *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964), a treatise by the “structural anthropologist” Claude Lévi-Strauss (b. 1908), whose subversively “relativistic” theories on the correspondences between modern thought, including scientific and historical thought, and ancient or prehistoric myth had made him a

hero of the sixties New Left. The readings Berio selected were from creation myths, and the mysterious opening thus stands in a Romantic line beginning with Haydn's oratorio *The Creation*, and extending through Beethoven's Ninth (quoted explicitly in Berio's third movement) and Wagner's *Ring*, on to the great twentieth-century torsos like Scriabin's *Mysterium* and Schoenberg's *Jakobsleiter* that had achieved mythic stature in the historiography of "Western music."

That is ambitious company, and Berio intended a new commentary on the eternal question of the relation between the present and the past. The most explicit discussion comes in the third movement, the most famous one, in which the corresponding movement of Mahler's Second Symphony (which already contained semihidden, ironic allusions to works by Beethoven, Schumann, and Bruckner) unwinds virtually in its entirety as a background to a frantic projection of "graffiti," some in the form of spoken words (many drawn from Samuel Beckett's novel *The Unnamable*, the bible of postwar existentialism from which the epigraph to chapter 1 in this book is also drawn), others in the form of whispered solmization syllables, still others in the form of allusions in the orchestra to a panoply of repertoire items from Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms to Debussy, Ravel, Schoenberg, and Stravinsky (not omitting Berio himself and other Darmstadt alumni). The orchestra also adds some startling dissonant clusters, perhaps in the spirit of revolutionary slogans scrawled on the walls of public buildings.

What was later widely identified as "postmodernist" commentary on the simultaneity of the past and the present thanks to media and memory, and the impossibility of innovation except through unexpected juxtaposition and collage, is foreshadowed here. But that is not all. The word *graffiti* (writing on walls) is especially apposite for this movement, since among the words muttered or shouted by the singers are slogans ("Forward!" "We shall overcome!") that Berio took down from the walls of Paris during the 1968 student riots at the Sorbonne, which he had witnessed at first hand.

Among all the other things it can be construed as being, then, Berio's collage was a panorama of the moment of historical disruption and unrest that was "the sixties." The idea of an overload of experience was conveyed in a manner somewhat reminiscent of the manner of a medieval motet: the texts are often fragmented by hockets and voice exchanges, and often compete simultaneously for the listener's attention, so that the overall effect, as Berio put it in a program note, was one of "not quite hearing"—an experience that was, he said, "essential to the nature of the musical process," just as it was part of the experience of living through a turbulent time. Even the appropriation of Mahler as the soundtrack for Berio's sonic newsreel was a comment on the decade, since the sixties, which began with Mahler's birth centennial year, were the decade of Mahler's triumphant return (or rather his long-deferred admission) to the active symphonic repertoire, in which performances conducted by Leonard Bernstein, the Philharmonic's conductor and *Sinfonia's* dedicatee, had played a crucial role.

Also straddling the archaically ritualized and the ultratopical is the second movement of *Sinfonia*, "O King." Its structure is like a modernized isorhythmic motet, with an abstractly conceived pitch ostinato interacting and overlapping with an abstractly conceived rhythmic ostinato. Interacting, meanwhile, with both of these is a series of vowel sounds enunciated by the singers, derived according to a similarly abstract plan from a structural typology of vowels developed before the war by the British linguist Daniel Jones. (Readers interested in the full details of these pitch, duration, and vowel "rows," and in tracking their deployment, can find a detailed analysis in David Osmond-Smith's handbook, *Playing on Words: A Guide to Luciano Berio's "Sinfonia"* [London, 1985]; it requires seventeen pages to lay out all the ingenious details.)

Toward the end of the movement, these stately and impersonally interacting cycles give way to a more obviously manipulated passage that leads to a climax (Ex. 7-8) in which the vowels are permuted into a different order and equipped with consonants to articulate them, revealing for all to hear (or perhaps "not quite hear") that they are the constituent vowels of the phrase "O Martin Luther King." The movement is in fact a memorial to the slain civil-rights leader, and forms a kind of delta into which several other of *Sinfonia's* symbolic streams flow. The relationship of such a memorial to a panorama of the sixties is self-evident. Less obvious, perhaps, is

the relationship to the Lévi-Strauss readings in the first movement, which had coalesced toward the end on the mythical idea of the *héros tué*, the “slain hero.” Berio had written “O King” in 1967 as a tribute, and decided, after King’s martyrdom, to adapt the piece (originally scored for a single singer and a chamber ensemble) for the large forces of *Sinfonia* to serve as a commemoration, and (as he has told interviewers) as a rebuke to the Americans for their slow progress toward racial justice. To incorporate such sentiments into so ostentatious a technical tour de force, or to filter their expression through so arcane a medium of representation, raises some serious ancillary questions, however—questions that threaten to reopen some old misgivings about the relationship of elite art and civil society.

The image shows a page of a musical score for Luciano Berio's "O King" from Sinfonia II. The score is for a large ensemble including Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Violin (Vln.), Viola (Vcl.), Voice, and Piano (Pno.). The tempo is marked as quarter note = 120, then slows to quarter note = 60. The score includes various dynamics (ff, p, mf, pp, f, ff pp) and articulations (rall., sempre p, senza pedale, due ped.). The lyrics "Mar tin Lu ther King" are written below the voice part. The score is marked with a "G" in a box at the top.

ex. 7-8 Luciano Berio, *Sinfonia*, II (“O King”)

These questions were reformulated in the aftermath of the 1960s, by the journalist and social critic Tom Wolfe

(b. 1931), under the rubric of “radical chic.” Wolfe coined the phrase in the title of a much discussed and debated magazine article that described a party given by Leonard Bernstein and his wife in their Park Avenue duplex penthouse apartment, in January 1970 (on the eve of Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday), to raise money for the legal defense of the Black Panthers, one of the most radical activist organizations of the day on behalf of minority rights, and one of the most controversial owing to their recourse to confrontational and occasionally violent tactics—tactics (including openly anti-Semitic rhetoric) that were contributing to the sundering of the bonds of solidarity between blacks and white liberals that King had sought to strengthen, and undermining, perhaps permanently, the integrationist “melting-pot” ideal.

An invited guest, Wolfe subjected the occasion to a scathing satire born of his impression that the sentiments motivating the Bernsteins’ espousal of the Panthers’ controversial cause were less altruistic than narcissistic. The climax, of both outrage and hilarity, came when Wolfe quoted Bernstein as expressing his solidarity with the Black Panthers by citing his own “problem about being unwanted”<sup>57</sup> as an artist in America, putting his own self-pity front and center. The implicit accusation was that pampered elites, whether social or intellectual or artistic, were incapable of any other response to social problems than a self-centered or frivolously self-regarding one, and that their acts of apparent (even subjectively sincere) social conscience amounted to nothing more than a means of self-congratulation.

It was a blunt and maliciously overstated attack, but many acknowledged its grain of truth. The taint of glamour was at odds with the claim of sincerity; solidarity was compromised by condescension. The same contradiction has dogged the reception of high artistic tributes to the causes of social underdogs and to the iconic embodiments of such causes, like Martin Luther King Jr. Who is the true hero of an ostentatious tour de force like Berio’s “O King”? Is it the righteous man to whom it was dedicated, or is it the clever man who devised it? The former would in all likelihood not have recognized the tribute. Indeed, it is questionable whether anyone could get the point of the piece, or even notice the emergence of King’s name, without consulting a program note or an analysis. It was another case, to recall Benjamin Britten’s Aspen lecture (quoted in chapter 5), of being addressed (discourteously, Britten would have insisted) in a language one did not understand.

Why was such a language deemed necessary or appropriate for such a purpose? Could there be a sincere or effective tribute to the civil-rights movement on terms so esoteric? Or had the voice of reverent conscience become, in the gloomy words of the cultural historian A. N. Wilson, “inaudible against the din of machines and the atonal banshee of the emerging egomania called The Modern”<sup>58</sup>? Answers to these questions are not self-evident. But the questions persisted and nagged, and contributed to the erosion of faith in the sanctity of high art that found its watershed in the “postmodern” decades that followed the sixties.

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## Notes:

(46) Robert Henderson, “Henze, Hans Werner,” in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Vol. VIII (1980 ed.), p. 492.

(47) Hans Werner Henze, *Bohemian Fifths: An Autobiography*, trans. Steward Spencer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 207.

(48) *Ibid.*, p. 208.

(49) *Ibid.*, p. 209.

(50) Hans Werner Henze, liner note to Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft 139 374 Stereo (ca. 1970).

(51) “Does Music Have to Be Political?” in Hans Werner Henze, *Music and Politics: Collected Writings 1953–81*, trans. Peter Laban (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 169–70.



(52) Henze, *Deutsche Grammophon* liner notes.

(53) *Ibid.*

(54) Henze, *Bohemian Fifths*, p. 212.

(55) *Ibid.*, p. 194.

(56) Henze, *Music and Politics*, p. 171.

(57) Tom Wolfe, *Radical Chic and Mau-mauing the Flak Catchers* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1970), p. 71.

(58) A. N. Wilson, *God's Funeral: The Decline of Faith in Western Civilization* (New York: Norton, 1999), p. 12.

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## Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

# CHAPTER 8 A Harmonious Avant-Garde?

## Minimalism: Young, Riley, Reich, Glass; Their European Emulators

Chapter: CHAPTER 8 A Harmonious Avant-Garde?

Source: MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Author(s): Richard Taruskin

### NEW SITES OF INNOVATION

*Removal of context was an important point in the magic of music.*<sup>1</sup>

—Brian Eno (1981)

*Believe it or not, I have no real interest in music from Haydn to Wagner.*<sup>2</sup>

—Steve Reich (1987)

The first identifiable group of composers in the literate tradition whose music not only exemplified but threw on the blurring of sociostylistic categories discussed in the previous chapter were the ones associated with a nebulous stylistic or esthetic category known as minimalism. The term, as usual, was applied to the music *ex post facto*, and its relevance to the object it purports to describe is debatable. Of the alternatives that have been proposed over the years, “pattern and process music” might be the most neutrally descriptive. But as one of its protagonists, Steve Reich (b. 1936), has observed, “Debussy resented ‘Impressionism.’ Schoenberg preferred ‘pantonal’ to ‘atonal’ or ‘twelve-tone’ or ‘Expressionist.’ Too bad for them.”<sup>3</sup>

As will become all too clear in what follows, there is no single technical or stylistic feature that unites the music of all the composers to whom the term “minimalist” has been applied, nor is there any technical or stylistic feature that is unique to their music. In some ways, the name is an obvious misnomer, since one of the most conspicuous features of “minimalist” music is extravagant length — length one might be tempted to call “Feldmanian,” except that Morton Feldman (see chapter 2), despite his trademark wispiqueness, is not normally classified as a minimalist. Minimalist music definitely comes out of what is often (if oxymoronic) called the “avant-garde tradition,” but much of it has been commercially successful beyond the dreams of most classical composers, and beyond the dreams of “traditional” avant-gardists by virtual definition.

That commercial success is one of the factors that have made the music controversial within the world of “classical modernism.” That contradiction is among the factors that have led to the coinage of a new term, “postmodernism,” to describe the most innovative art (not only music) of the last quarter of the twentieth century. The validity of the term, and its possible range of meanings, will be more thoroughly considered in the next chapter; but it should at least be mentioned at this point that among the defining characteristics of postmodernism, as normally understood, is precisely the blurring of sociostylistic categories that gave rise—or at least gave currency—to minimalism.

Minimalism can neither be strictly delimited to the “classical” sphere nor divorced from it. Its practitioners are as often listed and discussed in encyclopedias and dictionaries of popular music as in surveys of “modern music.” Its existence and success have thus been among the strongest challenges to the demarcation between

“high” and “popular” culture on which most twentieth-century esthetic theorizing and artistic practice have depended. One of the involuntary spokesmen from whom the epigraphs above were lifted, Brian Eno, is normally classified as a rock musician (albeit a somewhat atypical one), while the other, Steve Reich, is normally classified as a classical composer (albeit a somewhat atypical one).

It would be hard to justify the classification purely on the basis of musical style. The distinction seems rather to be based on the kinds of training they received. Eno had an art-school education and is relatively untutored in traditional music theory, while Reich had a university education and a more formal initiation into the literate tradition of music. But both create music for ensembles of amplified instruments. Both draw eclectically on many musical traditions (literate as well as nonliterate, “Western” as well as “non-Western”) formerly thought to be entirely separate if not incompatible. And both participate as sound-makers in the real-time performance of their own work, though neither is a performing virtuoso or a conductor.

The first and last of these traits, at least, had previously been far more characteristic of pop artists than of classical composers. But if one had to name the single crucial feature that unites all musicians in the minimalist movement and underlies all their attitudes, it would have to do with their relationship to the recording and communications technologies that set the twentieth century apart from all previous centuries. They are the first generation of musicians who grew up taking those technologies and all their implications for granted. They received their formative musical experiences from records and broadcasts, and they founded their idea of the musical world on the full range of experience to which those technologies gave access.

One could fairly say, on these grounds, that the minimalists constitute the first truly and authentically and fundamentally and exclusively *twentieth-century* generation of musicians. To say this may seem eccentric or even faintly ridiculous, since they arrived on the scene most of the way toward the twenty-first century. But that lag represents the time it took for twentieth-century technology to make its full impact on twentieth-century art. What it also represents, of course, is the fundamental irrelevance of arithmetical fictions like centuries to the march of events, and their capacity for clouding the minds of historians.

But everything that has been said so far about minimalism—the length of its products, its expanded range of cultural reference, its technological advancement—might seem to suggest that “maximalism” would have been a better name for it. Was there really nothing about the movement to justify its actual label? There was something, of course; but to see it one needs to place the origins of minimalism in a historical context. That context can be supplied by recalling the sneering question (already quoted anonymously in chapter 2) with which Charles Wuorinen, the most prominent academic serialist of his generation, tried, in the early sixties, to dismiss the work of the nonacademic avant-garde: “How can you make a revolution when the revolution before last has already said that anything goes?” That was indeed a quandary for those committed to the idea of perpetual innovation, and it reminds us how easily that idea can lead (as seen in chapter 2) to the debasement of the currency of modern art. It is no wonder then that, in implicit answer to Wuorinen's question (which, minus its implied hostility, was their question, too), a new musical avant-garde arose by decade's end, proclaiming the value of “that which is created with a minimum of means,”<sup>4</sup> and resolving “to concentrate on and delimit the work to be a single event or object.”<sup>5</sup> The obvious answer to “Anything goes!” was “No it doesn't!” The new maxim was “Reduce!”

Calls for radical reduction had been heard before. Mies van der Rohe's “functionalist” battle cry (“Less is more!”) had long since resounded through the halls of architecture; streamlining had long been the established modernist ideal. Neoclassicism had long ago been heralded by its French proponents as the *style dépouillé*, the “stripped-down style.” But the new strip-down far exceeded the limits of the old. It became, perversely, yet another form of maximalism: a virtual contest, staged throughout the third quarter of the century — first in the visual arts, somewhat later in music — to see who could strip away the most, on the assumption that the barest, most elemental expression was by that very token the most authentic.

As early as 1948 the abstract expressionist Barnett Newman (1905–70) exhibited an oil painting, *Onement 1*, that consisted of a single field of uniform red-brown color with a single stripe of red-orange, about an inch wide, running down the middle. Newman's best-known work, *Stations of the Cross* (1958–66), is a series of seven canvases divided vertically at intervals by black or white bands of various uniform widths. Mark Rothko (1903–70) won his greatest fame for enormous canvases divided into two or three floating rectangles of luminous color. Such pictures, with their insistence on stasis, were widely regarded as a reaction or an antithesis — or at least an alternative — to the wild, flamboyantly turbulent “action paintings” of Jackson Pollock, which had dominated the New York art scene in the decade preceding Pollock's violent death in an automobile crash. In place of Pollock's emotional turmoil, Newman and Rothko offered refuge in impersonal (Newman called it heroic) sublimity.

Younger artists went further. In 1951, John Cage's friend Robert Rauschenberg produced a series of paintings consisting of nothing but panels of white house-paint on unprimed canvas. A few years later, Ad (Adolph) Reinhardt (1913–67) did it in black. By 1965, “Minimal Art,” or “Minimalism,” had been officially christened by the philosopher and critic Richard Wollheim in an influential magazine article, and entered the standard parlance of the art world.<sup>6</sup> Like “Impressionism,” the term was coined with hostile intent; the critic was protesting what he saw as minimal (that is, insufficient) artistic content in the work of some recently exhibited painters. But like the older term, it was apt enough to fill a gap in terminology, and eventually lost its sting. It became a neutral term of reference and was even adopted by some artists as the name of a self-conscious esthetic program.

It spawned theorists. Ad Reinhardt “maximized” Mies van der Rohe's old functionalist dictum into a minimalist credo: “Less in art is not less. More in art is not more. Too little in art is not too little. Too much in art is too much.”<sup>7</sup> And he issued a set of “Rules for a New Academy” that began with “The Six General Canons or Six Noes” (yes, there are really seven)—

- No realism or existentialism
- No impressionism
- No expressionism or surrealism
- No fauvism, primitivism, or brute art
- No constructivism, sculpture, plasticism, or graphic arts
- No collage, paste, paper, sand, or string
- No “*trompe-l'oeil*,” interior decoration, or architecture

—and ended with “Twelve Technical Rules” (yes, there are really sixteen):

- No texture
- No brushwork or calligraphy
- No sketching or drawing
- No forms
- No design
- No colors
- No light
- No space
- No time

- No size or scale
- No movement
- No object, no subject, no matter
- No symbols, images, or signs
- Neither pleasure nor pain
- No mindless working or mindless non-working
- No chess-playing

8

The last rule was a waggish allusion to Marcel Duchamp, the venerable Dadaist, who had given up painting for chess. And surely Reinhardt's spoofy list, like Duchamp's "ready-mades" or Cage's "silent" pieces, was in part a Dada-inspired test of the limits of the "art" concept. Just as surely, though, it was a sign of the times as well—times that again called for irony, coolness, and detachment in the face of the public turbulence described in the preceding chapter. Minimalism in art was related to the counterculture, if not exactly (or directly) its product. It was a way of "tuning in and dropping out." Under close scrutiny, Rauschenberg's white paintings or Reinhardt's black ones revealed tiny variations in hue and brushwork. To pay such anomalously pure artistic values such anomalously close attention was a way of ostentatiously not paying attention to what was so loudly claiming attention in the world outside.

The term "minimal" entered the vocabulary of music criticism in 1968, in an article by the English composer and critic Michael Nyman (b. 1944) about Cornelius Cardew. We met Cardew in chapter 2 as the quintessential "anything goes" man, so obviously the term has undergone some change in its musical applications since Nyman first used it. What struck Nyman as minimal about Cardew was the process of composition rather than the result. The same goes even more emphatically for Cage's *4'33"*, sometimes called the ne plus ultra of minimal (if not "minimalist") music, since the composer contributes so little to what happens during its specified duration. But again, the content, being unspecified, might as well be maximal as minimal. In any case, neither Cardew's *Scratch Music* nor Cage's *4'33"*, nor any piece of indeterminate or purely conceptual art, can fulfill the terms of musical minimalism, for such works are not "created with a minimum of means," nor do they "concentrate on and delimit the work to be a single event or object."

But chapter 2, the same chapter that described the work of Cardew, also included a description (and even the complete "score") of a work that did conform to those specifications. That work was La Monte Young's *Composition 1960 #7* (see Fig. 2-8a), consisting in its entirety of a notated perfect fifth (B-F#) and the direction "hold for a long time." And La Monte Young was the author of the two defining phrases requested in the foregoing paragraph. The early date of both *Composition* and the definitions entitles Young to recognition, at least in books like this, as the conceptual founder of the American "minimalist school," even if he contributed relatively little to the eventual path it took.

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## Notes:

(1) Jim Aiken, "Brian Eno," *Keyboard* 7 (July 1981); quoted in Eric Tamm, *Brian Eno: His Music and the Vertical Color of Sound* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), p. 17.

(2) Edward Strickland, *American Composers: Dialogues on Contemporary Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 47.

(3) *Ibid.*, p. 45.

(4) La Monte Young, quoted in K. Robert Schwarz, *Minimalists* (London: Phaidon, 1996), p. 9.

(5) La Monte Young, quoted in Keith Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 48.

(6) Richard Wollheim, "Minimal Art," *Arts Magazine*, January 1965, pp. 26–32.

(7) Lucy Lippard, *Ad Reinhardt: Paintings* (New York: Jewish Museum, 1966), p. 23.

(8) Quoted in Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 44–45.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

See also from Grove Music Online

La Monte Young

Fluxus

Anton Webern

## LEGENDARY BEGINNINGS

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 8 A Harmonious Avant-Garde?

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

The status of founder always commands an aura. Young's is the name that shimmers in accounts of minimalism, despite (or rather, because of) the infrequency with which his music has ever been performed. In chapter 2 we encountered him in connection with Fluxus, the loose association of artists and musicians on the fringe of the New York art scene who promoted “happenings” — acts of “performance art” or dreams of conceptual art that might or might not include music. As mentioned in that discussion, *Composition 1960 #7* was the only one of Young's compositions of that period that used musical notation, the others specifying actions other than sound-producing ones, even if they did use musical equipment. The one most often cited by connoisseurs of eccentricity is his *Piano Piece for David Tudor #1*: “Bring a bale of hay and a bucket of water onto the stage for the piano to eat and drink. The performer may then feed the piano or leave it to eat by itself. If the former, the piece is over after the piano has been fed. If the latter, it is over after the piano eats or decides not to.”

Young's association with Fluxus was brief and uncharacteristic. His fascination with sounds “held for a long time,” however, was of long standing and wielded a strong and highly ramified influence. His early career, albeit hopelessly encrusted by now in mythology of his own and others' making, illustrates the division within the music world that his later career transcended. Born in rural Idaho, Young grew up listening to popular music on the radio and playing jazz saxophone. (After making his avant-garde reputation, he preferred to say that his real musical education consisted of listening to the endless hum of high-tension wires and the sublime squalling of thunderstorms.) As soon as he got to UCLA, he was put on the same Schoenbergian compositional regimen as everyone else. (The teacher who encouraged him in his earliest composing was Leonard Stein, Schoenberg's old California assistant.) On his own he discovered Webern, whose sparseness spurred him to emulation.

The product of an urge to surpass, even if only a paradoxical sort of surpassing in restriction, limitation, and reduction, Young's early efforts demonstrate yet again the strange kinship between the new minimalism and the old maximalism. During the summer of 1958, between his UCLA commencement and his enrollment in the graduate composition program at UC Berkeley, Young composed a String Trio, ostensibly modeled on Webern's op. 20. Its first 159 measures are shown in Ex. 8-1. It may well be the most notorious composition ever produced in class by a first-year graduate student.

The music in Ex. 8-1 consists of the unfolding of a single chromatic aggregate— what in Webern would be called a single twelve-tone row. The first three pitches introduced are, moreover, typically Webernian in the way the cello's D fills the pitch-class space between the viola's C $\sharp$  and the violin's E $\flat$ , completing a symmetrically disposed unit. Among the classics of early atonality are a couple of Webern pieces in which the unfolding of a couple of chromatic aggregates furnished the entire musical content. In one of his *Three Little Pieces for Cello and Piano*, op. 11 (1914), Webern managed to pare the contents down to a single aggregate, like the one in Ex. 8-1. That might already be considered a kind of minimalism.

But Webern's pieces take seconds to perform, whereas Young's opening aggregate (about a quarter of the entire piece), in which the three instruments together produce only eleven discrete sounds (single notes or double stops), takes eleven minutes to unfold, of which the first five are occupied by the first three notes. The extreme slowness of the unfolding, also describable as the extreme length of time the process occupies, magnifies the impression of "minimal" musical content far beyond anything even remotely suggested by Webern.

Also magnified far beyond anything actually found in Schoenberg or Webern is their notorious idealism. Critics have often called attention to aspects of notation in their work (like the "hairpin" crescendos on single piano notes in Schoenberg's op. 23) that relate to the "idea" rather than the sound of the music. Young's Trio abounds in notational features unrelated to the sonic realization. The many tempo changes that take place on rests (or in the middle of sustained tones) are instances, as are the many "syncopated" entries made without any accentuation or surrounding pulse against which syncopations may be measured, or even perceived, by the ear.

The image displays five systems of musical notation for a piano trio. Each system consists of three staves: piano (top), violin (middle), and cello (bottom). The notation includes notes, rests, and various performance markings such as *senza vibr.*, *ppp*, *mp*, *pp*, *rit.*, *con sord.*, *ord.*, *cresc.*, and *mf*. Tempo markings are indicated by quarter notes with values: 80, 100, 112, 132, 82, and 132. Fingerings (e.g., 5, 8, 13, 6, 4) and articulations (e.g., *3*, *3*) are also present. The score is written in a style that emphasizes the slow, unfolding nature of the music.



ex. 8-1 La Monte Young, String Trio, mm. 1–159

The willingness (or compulsion, or capacity) to take things to unaccountable extremes immediately marked Young's work as "avant-garde" in the classical meaning of the word. There is no doubt, then, about the esthetic from which minimalism emerged. It was, at first, an art of alienation and social disaffection in the late, late romantic tradition. Young's uncompromising commitment to the ideology of modernism is further reflected in his widely quoted remark: "Often I hear somebody say that the most important thing about a work of art is not that it be new but that it be good, but I am not interested in good; I am interested in new—even if this includes the possibility of its being evil."<sup>9</sup>

The Trio has lived in legend as an emblem of that stance. Its legend has several distinct phases, beginning with the legend of its angry rejection by the composer's professors at Berkeley, continuing with the legend of high

praise from Stockhausen (allegedly overheard, and later reported, by Cardew) at Darmstadt in the summer of 1959, and cemented by an almost complete absence of performances, so that its reputation is sustained almost entirely by history books and hearsay, and by Young's avowal, borne out (if only indirectly) by subsequent events, that his purpose in writing the Trio was to "influence the history of music."<sup>10</sup> Never published—it is on deposit along with the rest of Young's graduate-school submissions at the Berkeley music library and otherwise available only from the composer—the hour-long Trio has had only a handful of documented public airings (some of them in arrangements for other ensembles of strings). The first was a reading arranged by Seymour Shifrin (1926–79), Young's composition teacher, in an effort to persuade him that the outlandish time-scale was a miscalculation. The tiny audience consisted of the rest of the seminar. Perhaps the most recent performance, by three members of the Arditti Quartet (a well-known ensemble specializing in contemporary music) took place at a London music festival in 1989.

Much primed by the legend, the work was received this time in a manner reminiscent of the way Morton Feldman's music is now usually interpreted: as a spiritual exercise. The cello's consonant perfect fifth at the end of the row, unusual in twelve-tone music (although it returns at various transpositions in other instrumental parts when the row is subjected to standard serial permutations), was singled out as prophetic by those who interpreted the Trio in the context of the transformations "minimalist" writing had undergone in three decades of subsequent development. Edward Strickland, an early historian of minimalism, shrewdly observed that "the extended fifth," unexpected and therefore striking in its serial context, "was soon to recur in Young's work in a totally different context—i.e., no context, as the entire content of *Composition 1960 #7*."<sup>11</sup>

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## Notes:

(9) La Monte Young, "Lecture 1960," in Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists*, p. 48.

(10) Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists*, p. 34.

(11) Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins*, p. 121.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

See also from Grove Music Online

La Monte Young

Minimalism

## MUSIC AS SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 8 A Harmonious Avant-Garde?

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

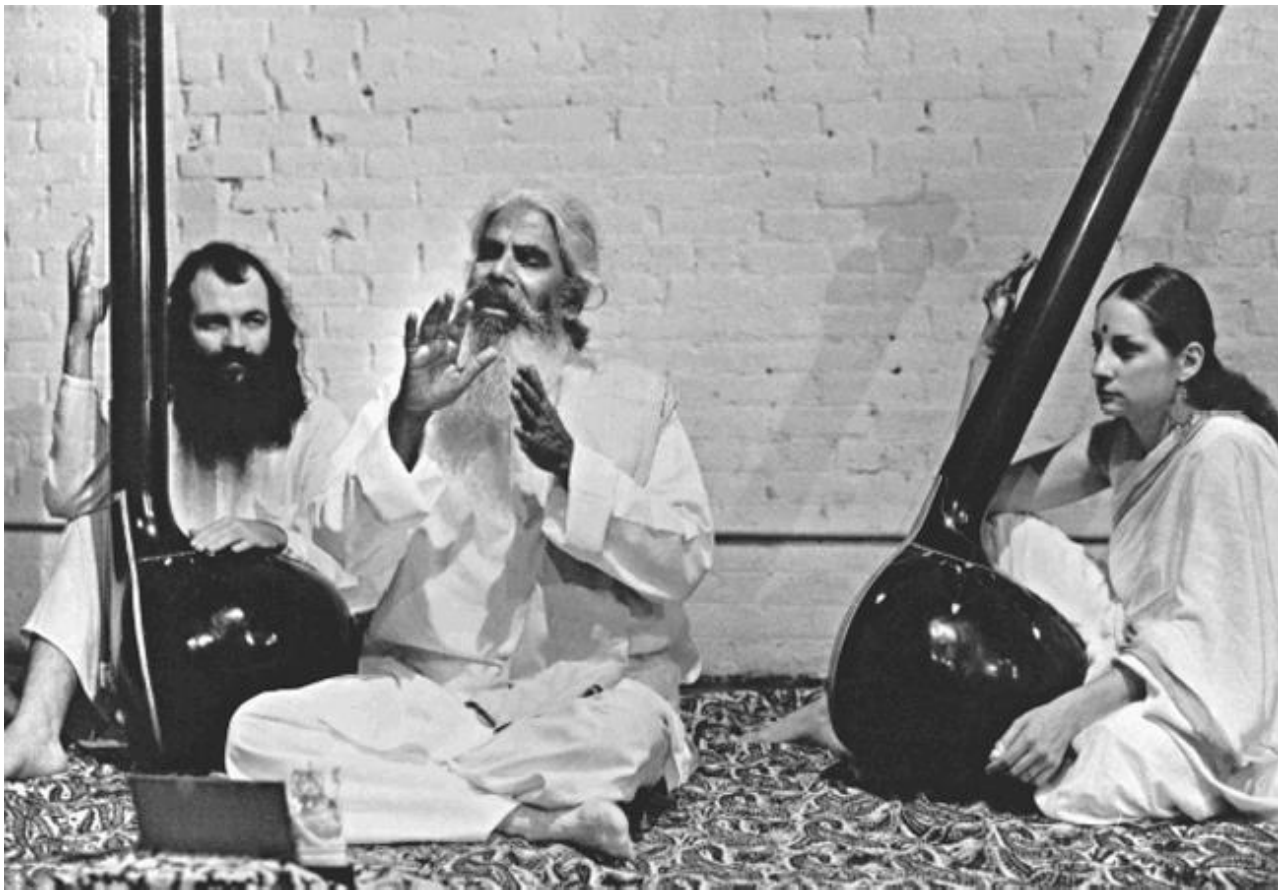


fig. 8-1 La Monte Young with Pran Nath and Marian Zazeela, 1971.

But the “spiritualizing” interpretation carried conviction. By 1989 Young had made a decisive turn toward a religious lifestyle, having in 1970 become a disciple of Pran Nath, an Indian musician and spiritual guru. In the early 1960s, after moving to New York, he and his wife, the painter and performance artist Marian Zazeela, had founded the Theatre of Eternal Music, an ensemble dedicated to the devout daily rehearsal and very occasional performance of his work, which consisted of several enormous, ongoing, and unfinishable compositions, reminiscent in concept of the famous torsos (Scriabin's *Mysterium*, Ives's *Universe*) of early-twentieth-century music. They achieved their huge dimensions through the application of improvisatory and ritualistically repetitive techniques to tiny preplanned and notated musical ideas or “modules,” following a set of verbal instructions that Young (possibly recalling his serial training) calls “algorithms.” These utopian compositions,

such as *The Four Dreams of China*, realizable only in small snatches, have been “eternally” in progress since the early 1960s. Perhaps needless to say, they no longer employ twelve-tone procedures, Young having come to see a contradiction between the all-encompassing, undifferentiated twelve-tone approach to pitch and his ideal of concentration, delimitation, and singleness. Pitch has been the area, in fact, to which he has applied the most rigorous restrictions, arriving finally at an approach based on natural acoustical resonance (invested, in his thinking, with purity and holiness) that virtually excludes conventional chromaticism of any kind. Since the mid-1970s, much of Young's composing and performing energy has been devoted to *The Well-Tuned Piano*, a body of music to be played on a piano tuned in a system of just (or Pythagorean) intonation.

However restricted the material, all of Young's compositions are predicated on the idea of infinite extension in time, achieved with the aid of electronic drones, or (in *The Well-Tuned Piano*) of a technique of synchronizing the musical rhythm with the acoustical beats arising out of the justly tuned intervals to set up a continuous resonant aura in the performing space and thus defeat the piano's quick sonic decay. By the time he set up the Theatre of Eternal Music, Young began associating his principle of “sustenance,” or long-sustained sounds, with the long-tone exercises that characterize the monastic practices of many religions, including Hinduism and Buddhism. Long tones sung or played on wind instruments are invested with the spiritual significance of controlled breathing, a prelude to meditation in which the body is pervaded with the divine spirit.

Young's brand of musical minimalism thus became (for him) a form of esoteric religious practice, a discipline to be carried out by and in the presence of initiates rather than performed before the general public. Accordingly, as his career continued, Young deliberately withdrew from the public eye, or whatever corner of it he had access to, giving few concerts and issuing or authorizing recordings only at rare intervals. The latter have tended to become cult objects, like the so-called “Black LP” produced in Germany in 1970: a long-playing record encased in a black plastic sleeve with program notes on the back reproduced from the composer's own calligraphy in faint gray ink, à la Rauschenberg. (The front of the sleeve is decorated with a mandala-like design by Zazeela in the same barely discernible color.)

Side I contains, in the composer's words, “a section of the longer work *Map of 49's Dream The Two Systems of Eleven Sets of Galactic Intervals Ornamental Lightyears Tracery*, begun in 1966 as a subsection of the even larger work *The Tortoise, His Dreams and Journeys* which was begun in 1964 with my group The Theatre of Eternal Music.” Its title is *31 VII 69 10:26–10:49 pm*, and it consists of exactly twenty-three minutes of wordless chanting by Young and Zazeela, recorded at a Munich art gallery on 31 July 1969 at the time specified by the title, to the accompaniment of a sine-wave generator that gives out a continuous G below middle C. Zazeela's part is confined to doubling the drone, while Young's voice slides among tones that harmonize with the drone at perfect Pythagorean intervals: unison, octave, octave plus minor seventh, fourth, and major second (the progressions from the fourth below to the octave below or the second above supplying perfect fifths as well; see Ex. 8-2). Near the end, Zazeela moves briefly from the drone to the second and then resumes the drone.



ex. 8-2 La Monte Young, *31 VII 69 10:26–10:49 pm*, transcribed from “Black LP”

The second side of the record contains even less apparent variety. It is called *23 VIII 64 2:50:45–3:11 am the Volga Delta* and consists of 20'15" of uninterrupted sound produced by Young and Zazeela by drawing double bass bows along the sides of a gong. It is intended as a demonstration of harmonic complexity, requiring for this

purpose the same kind of unusually close and concentrated attention to small variations as Ad Reinhardt's black paintings (a concentration best achieved, by the composer's open avowal, with the assistance of cannabis or some other consciousness-expanding drug). It may be played either at the standard RPM turntable speed or at half speed (available in the early sixties on some specially adapted phonographs used for office dictation) to bring some of the higher overtones down into the range of human audibility. A jacket note explains, "One may listen to the pieces at soft levels, but ideally the sound should fill the room if the playback equipment can do so without distorting." The desired volume challenges not only the capabilities of the equipment but also the listener's endurance. This is obviously not music meant for casual or recreational listening or for the average (or even specialized) music audience.

Young's role in the propagation of minimalism as a secular fine-art practice, then, has been played largely behind the scenes. He has neither participated in nor benefited from its burgeoning public and commercial success but has affected its progress indirectly through the musicians with whom he has associated. Characteristically, this group crosscuts the old boundary between popular and serious music, diffusing Young's influence into a wide variety of avant-garde musics on both sides of the Atlantic.

One of Young's most regular early associates, the Welsh-born John Cale (b. 1942), who performed on amplified viola in the Theatre of Eternal Music between the end of 1963 and late 1965, went on to join the singer and songwriter Lou Reed (b. 1943) in forming the "alternative rock" band the Velvet Underground, and later collaborated with Brian Eno. Another alumnus of the Theatre, the percussionist Angus MacLise (1938–79), participated along with Cale in a short-lived predecessor to the Velvet Underground called the Primitives. Tony Conrad (b. 1940), an avant-garde filmmaker with formal training in mathematics, played amplified violin and bowed electric guitar in the Theatre. It was he who introduced Young to the mathematical principles of just intonation.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

**See also from Grove Music Online**

Terry Riley

Recorded sound

Avant garde

## A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS?

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 8 A Harmonious Avant-Garde?

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

Young's most conspicuous early disciple was Terry Riley (b. 1935), the composer through whom minimalism first impinged on the consciousness of "mainstream" performers and critics and found a wide audience. A fellow graduate student at Berkeley, Riley also chafed against the forced regimen of serial composition then administered at the school. Unlike Young, he managed to complete an M.A. in 1961, but only by writing a twelve-tone composition, immediately disavowed, to satisfy the degree requirement. (Coincidentally or not, it was another string trio.)

What really interested Riley at the time was the composing he was doing to accompany a local modern dance ensemble. Like many others, he experimented with tape loops. He also made use of a device called an echoplex (developed by Ramon Sender, a San Francisco sound engineer) that was similar to the feedback generator Vladimir Ussachevsky had played with a decade earlier in New York (see chapter 4). It fed the signal emitted by a tape recorder's playback head back into the recording head, thus producing a sort of ever-accumulating canon.



fig. 8-2 Terry Riley, Munich, 1992.

Shortly after receiving his Berkeley degree, Riley took some of the tape loop pieces he had composed for the dance group and, subjecting their already repetitive sounds to echoplex treatment, came up with a relatively lengthy composition based almost entirely on reiterations of sometimes recognizable, more often unrecognizable fragments of previously used material. He called it *Mescaline Mix* after the name of a psychedelic drug produced from cactus plants, a forerunner of LSD, that was popular among the San Francisco Beat poets and their successors, the hippies. By drawing this association, Riley made explicit the connection between the new avant-garde and the same counterculture out of which progressive rock was about to emerge.

Replacing Young's "sustenance" with "looping" as the carrier of minimalism's infinite expanse proved a decisive move, especially when Riley followed up with a piece that transferred the looping technique to the domain of

“live” music, music performed by humans in real time. This was not the first instance of live music imitating electronic; the recent “sonorist” compositions of the Eastern European avant-garde—Ligeti's *Atmosphères*, Penderecki's *Threnody*—had that distinction. But by combining the looping principle with Young's “algorithmic” method, Riley set the stage for the next, and possibly the last, true “revolution” in the history with which this book is concerned. From it emerged what Riley himself called “music that could be avant-garde and get an audience too.”<sup>12</sup> From the traditional modernist perspective, the idea of a “popular avant-garde” was simply a contradiction in terms. But then, so was the idea of “traditional modernism.” Both apparent oxymorons were products of the changes the sixties had wrought in patterns of musical consumption, something never foreseen by the modernists of the earlier twentieth century or their theoretical spokespersons. The work that provided the decisive practical refutation of earlier modernist (or historicist) theory was a composition, written in the spring of 1964, to which Riley gave the frankly provocative title *In C*.

Ex. 8-3 is the complete “full” score of *In C*. One is not likely to guess by looking at it that the composition of which it is the notation lasts anywhere between half an hour and three full hours, to cite the range of its documented performances. It is best known from a Columbia recording issued in 1968, which preserves a studio performance by the composer with members of the Center of the Creative and Performing Arts in the State University of New York at Buffalo. That performance lasts exactly forty-four minutes.

Each of the fifty-three numbered “modules,” which can be played by “any number of any kind of instruments” (including vocalizing singers) either at the notated pitch or at any octave transposition (and using either the notated time values or any arithmetic augmentation or diminution thereof), is to be “looped”—that is, repeated ad libitum before moving on to the next. The piece is over when all performers (in practice usually somewhere between a dozen and thirty) have reached the last module. Dynamics and articulations are ad libitum as well, and players are free to omit modules unsuitable to their playing technique, and to pause between or even within modules.

Percussion may be added, too, so long as it keeps strict time. The only constraints are for the sake of homogeneity of result: players are discouraged from using instruments that uniquely represent a given range or octave transposition, or from running too far ahead of the rest of the ensemble (or staying too far behind), and all players should be regulated by the same eighth-note pulse (given out audibly by a timekeeper who plays the top octave of Cs on a piano or a high tuned percussion instrument like a xylophone or glockenspiel).



The image displays a musical score for Terry Riley's 'In C', consisting of 53 numbered measures across ten staves. The notation is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The music is a single melodic line with various rhythmic patterns and rests, characteristic of Riley's minimalist style. The measures are numbered 1 through 53, with some measures containing multiple notes and others being rests.

ex. 8-3 Terry Riley, *In C*, full score

Thus the players, while given far more freedom of spontaneous choice than in conventional notated music, remain disciplined participants in a collective undertaking comparable to the Indonesian gamelan, to whose music Riley was attracted. *In C* is in no sense an “aleatoric” composition or a free-for-all, but rather an “algorithmic” one, controlled by a set of firm if loosely specified rules. Its unfolding is highly structured. Sustained and moving parts are balanced to produce interesting textures; and when, as Riley has said he intended, no more than four modules are in play at any given time, the music falls into clear sectional divisions marked by the introduction of new pitches and the disappearance of old ones.

Thus introduction of F# at the fourteenth module (seemingly a segment from the Indonesian *pelog* scale) marks an important sectional divide. (Modules 11 to 13 can also be construed as typical gamelan figures in *pelog*

tuning.) Confinement to the scale segment E-B (with F $\sharp$ ) from module 22 to 28 marks another. Modules 29–30 might seem to mark a return to the opening “title” tonality, but any impression that *In C* is actually — that is, functionally — in C in ordinary tonal terms is contradicted by the end. The note C is avoided from module 45 on, and the last five modules introduce the note B $\flat$ . The most one could say is that the piece passes through a modular tonal scheme in accordance with its overall modular construction.

The extraordinary reception Riley's piece enjoyed on its premiere performances, at the San Francisco Tape Music Center on 4 and 6 November 1964, surprised everyone. Alfred Frankenstein (1906–81), the venerable (and unusually tolerant) critic of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, then in his thirtieth and last year on the paper, was bowled over. “At times,” he wrote, “you feel you have never done anything all your life long but listen to this music and as if that is all there is or ever will be, but it is altogether absorbing, exciting, and moving, too.”<sup>13</sup> He was the first of many to compare its slowed-down time scale, its gradual evolutionary unfolding, and its “climaxes of great sonority [that] appear and are dissolved in the endlessness” to the sublime effect of a Bruckner symphony.

But just as obviously, *In C* was a model of a very different kind of social behavior from that of a symphony orchestra. Riley is on record as rejecting the “symphony” model:

I distrust the organization of the orchestra, which is like the army. You've got this general sitting in his chair, then the lieutenants, and so on down to the privates in the back rows. There's a lot of that kind of politics in the orchestra, which I find pretty disagreeable as a way to make music together. Not all orchestras are guilty of this kind of hierarchy, but it exists to a degree in most. So it just didn't seem like a very healthy climate.<sup>14</sup>

Instead, *In C* represented a model of cooperative behavior of a kind that was at the heart of the sixties counterculture, with its hippie communes and ashrams, and the explicit parallel between the symphony orchestra, emblem that it was of the musical establishment, and the worst aspects of military life was a pointed reminder of what the counterculture was countering at the time of America's most unpopular military engagement. Also evident at a glance, and equally crucial to its immediate appeal, was *In C*'s relative ease of performance. It does not require highly trained professional musicians, although nothing precludes their participation. It lends itself equally well to all kinds of nonstandard ensembles, and it encourages mixtures of players from different walks of musical life. It received many performances by rock bands and early-music groups, and among the instruments in its first performance were jazz saxophones, rock guitars, and recorders.

The piece could be seen, from all of these perspectives, as proposing a more democratic, less hierarchical organization of society that might have appeared utopian in “real life,” but that could be actualized directly in music. It offered a working experience of countercultural paradise, or (as it was described in *Glamour* magazine) “the global village's first ritual symphonic piece.”<sup>15</sup> Yet even the amount of specification that the notation of the piece and its loose performance algorithm retained eventually came to seem politically undesirable to the composer, who virtually abandoned notation for the next twenty years, devoting himself to solo and group improvisation with the algorithms and modules propounded through direct interaction—a virtual reversion (or, as some preferred to see it, a regression) to an oral culture. Riley became known for all-night improvisation concerts for small, devoted countercultural audiences. His main communication with the outer world was in the form of recordings that preserved “multitrack” improvisations, put together by a process of “overdubbing” one improvised part on others that had already been recorded. Riley's best-known multitrack improvisations were issued on another Columbia LP disk in 1969.

The force behind Riley's perhaps unexpected access to a major commercial “classical” label was David Behrman (b. 1937), a Harvard-trained composer and sound engineer who had been converted to experimental music, and who worked from 1965 to 1970 as a producer for Columbia Masterworks. There he was given the go-ahead by the label's president Goddard Lieberson (1911–77), an Eastman-trained composer, to sample the

counterculture, whose work was after all cheap to produce on records, in an effort “to capture the imagination of the young audience.”<sup>16</sup> Side I of Riley's new disk contained a nineteen-minute, largely pentatonic, ostinato-based improvisation called *A Rainbow in Curved Air*, in which the multiply recorded composer played electric organ, amplified harpsichord, “rocksichord” (electronic keyboard), dumbec (a small Persian drum), and tambourine. The other side had twenty-two minutes of less structured improvisations on soprano saxophone (an instrument Riley briefly took up following La Monte Young's example) and electric organ, called *Poppy Nogood and the Phantom Band*. The liner note consisted entirely of a utopian environmental fantasy, recalling the turbulent war-protest conditions that provided the counterculture with its impetus:

And then all wars ended/Arms of every kind were outlawed and the masses gladly contributed them to giant foundries in which they were melted down and the metal poured back into the earth/The Pentagon was turned on its side and painted purple, yellow & green/All boundaries were dissolved/The slaughter of animals was forbidden/The whole of lower Manhattan became a meadow in which unfortunates from the Bowery were allowed to live out their fantasies in the sunshine and were cured/People swam in the sparkling rivers under blue skies streaked only with incense pouring from the new factories/The energy from dismantled nuclear weapons provided free heat and light/World health was restored/An abundance of organic vegetables, fruits and grains was growing wild along the discarded highways/National flags were sewn together into brightly colored circus tents under which politicians were allowed to perform harmless theatrical games/The concept of work was forgotten<sup>17</sup>

The fundamental question these pieces raised could be paraphrased: Could an avant-garde of harmonious simplicity really be an avant-garde? There is no doubt that if avant-garde means marginalization, then Riley was avant-garde. His music was never to be found in establishment venues, whether concert halls or commercial radio. If avant-garde means technical innovation, then Riley was avant-garde. His music, especially the improvisation disks, made use of cutting-edge technology. Even *In C* was structured in a way that could not be entirely accounted for by citing precedents, whether “classical,” “pop” or “world-music.”

But if avant-garde means alienation, then Riley was anything but avant-garde (except in relation to the academic establishment from which he was a renegade, and which his music accordingly enraged). In sharp contrast to Young's, Riley's music bent over backward—too far, some thought—to be inclusive and audience-friendly, and cast an implicit negative judgment on elite art. Its most obviously “retrograde” tendency was its reembracement of consonance. But such a move was retrograde only from the historicist perspective, which required that all art build directly on the achievements of the immediate past, and toward a goal that those earlier achievements implied. That was never the aim of the avant-garde.

The very fact that Riley's music located the site of innovation elsewhere than in the domain of “pitch organization” implied a rejection of yesterday's modernism, as did all truly avant-garde art. It was precisely the same gesture, in relation to academic serialism, as the one that postwar serialists had made in relation to neoclassicism. It expressly denied the main premise of its elite academic predecessor, as peremptorily summed up by Milton Babbitt when he observed that, since pitch is the most precisely quantifiable of all musical parameters, it was therefore inconceivable that “under any reasonable application of the world ‘important,’ it could be suggested that pitch is not the most important of the musical dimensions, since its susceptibility to musical structuring includes and exceeds that of any other dimension.”<sup>18</sup> Riley's music suggested, on the contrary, that there are other measures of musical importance besides the abstract structuring of pitch, and other available sites of significant innovation.

Of course it is also true that Riley's music of the 1960s bore conspicuous traits in common with the most crassly commercial musics of the 1970s. One was “disco,” a style developed in “discothèques,” nightclubs where people danced to recorded music, and where pop music was “remixed” by disc jockeys into all-night marathons of relentlessly repetitive, electronically realized “sequences” of commonplace riffs. Another was “New Age” music,

a commercial offshoot of the counterculture, which consisted of sweet and soothingly repetitive "mood music" for piano or electric keyboards (or harp or acoustic guitar), meant to accompany the meditative practices of tired businesspeople, many of them former hippies, in search of surcease from the stresses of success. Like any other once-new music, Riley's was often assimilated in the minds of its critics to the routine practices it had helped set in motion, and it suffered in retrospect the negative judgments the routines inspired.

But Riley himself had no part of those routines, or at least no part of their commercial success. More than any other "minimalist," Riley lived the actual life of the counterculture. Just when he could have capitalized on the success of his Columbia albums he "dropped out" into a virtually nomadic existence, gave up formal composition and public exposure, and disappeared from sight until he was rediscovered as a "classic" in the 1980s. So if avant-garde implies the disinterested service of art in implied protest against its commercial exploitation, then once again the composer qualifies, even if his works are finally judged not to.

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## Notes:

(12) Quoted in Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists*, p. 148.

(13) Alfred Frankenstein, "Music Like None Other On Earth," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 November 1964; quoted in Schwarz, *Minimalists*, p. 43.

(14) Terry Riley, quoted in Geoff Smith and Nicola Walker Smith, *New Voices: American Composers Talk about Their Music* (Portland, Ore.: Amadeus Press, 1995), p. 234.

(15) Quoted in Samuel Lipman, "From Avant-Garde to Pop," *Commentary* LXVIII, no. 1 (July 1979): 59.

(16) Quoted in Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists*, p. 133.

(17) Liner note to Columbia Records MS 7 315 (1969).

(18) Milton Babbitt, "Contemporary Music Composition and Contemporary Music Theory as Contemporary Intellectual History," in *Perspectives in Musicology*, eds. Barry S. Brook, Edward O. Downes, and Sherman van Solkema (New York: Norton, 1972), p. 165.

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# Oxford History of Western Music: Richard Taruskin

See also from Grove Music Online

Minimalism

Steve Reich

Electro-acoustic music (tape music)

## “CLASSICAL” MINIMALISM

**Chapter:** CHAPTER 8 A Harmonious Avant-Garde?

**Source:** MUSIC IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

**Author(s):** Richard Taruskin

For many listeners, the most characteristic and style-defining aspect of *In C* is the constant audible eighth-note pulse that underlies and coordinates all of the looping, and that seems, because it provides a constant pedal of Cs, to be fundamentally bound up with the work's concept. Like much modernist practice since at least Stravinsky, it puts the rhythmic spotlight on the “subtactile” level, accommodating and facilitating the free metamorphosis of the felt beat—for example, from quarters to dotted quarters at the twenty-second module of *In C*—and allows their multiple presence to be felt as levels within a complex texture. It may be surprising, therefore, to learn that the constant C-pulse was an afterthought, adopted in rehearsal for what seemed at the time a purely utilitarian purpose (simply to keep the group together in lieu of a conductor), and that it was not even Riley's idea. It was Reich's.

Steve Reich came from a background very different from Young's and Riley's. Where they had a rural, working-class upbringing on the West Coast, Reich was born into a wealthy, professional-class family in cosmopolitan New York. Like most children of his economic class, Reich had traditional piano lessons and plenty of exposure to what in later years he mildly derided as the “bourgeois classics.” He had an elite education culminating in a Cornell baccalaureate with a major in philosophy. Then came a year of intense private instruction in composition with Hall Overton (1920–72), a composer who combined classical and jazz idioms in a manner comparable to Gunther Schuller's Third Stream (see chapter 7).

Next, Reich put in three years of graduate study in the Juilliard School's rigorous and traditional (though nonserial) composition program, studying with prominent pedagogues like Vincent Persichetti (1915–87), who had been Overton's teacher, and William Bergsma (1921–94). Finally, lured by the presence of Luciano Berio on the faculty, Reich enrolled at Mills College for a master's degree, which he received in 1963. It was the sort of training that usually led to a career as an elite modernist rather than an avant-gardist.

In interviews, Reich has stated that the impressions that led him to his own personal musical predilections, and eventually to his decision to attempt a career as a composer, date from his fifteenth year, when friends introduced him, in close succession, to recordings of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, Bach's Fifth Brandenburg Concerto, and bebop, then the most modern form of jazz. The obvious common denominator of what might otherwise seem the three unrelated styles that aroused his enthusiasm is, of course, the presence of a strongly articulated subtactile pulse, the very thing that Reich (who participated in the first performances) contributed to *In C*. Baroque music has it, a lot of twentieth-century music (including both Stravinsky's “Russian” style and jazz) has it, but the repertoire of “bourgeois classics”—the music “from Haydn to Wagner,” as in this chapter's epigraph—generally lacks it. Rejecting the traditional classical repertoire as a source of inspiration was Reich's first youthful “avant-garde” gesture.

Having discovered that subtactile “rhythmic profile” (as he called it), Reich switched from piano lessons to

lessons in drumming. Significantly, though, his first percussion teacher was a "classical" one—who later became the principal timpanist of the New York Philharmonic, no less. It was only at Mills College that he discovered, again through recordings, the "non-Western" styles of percussion playing—West African drumming and Balinese gamelan—that effectively liberated his creative thinking from the assumptions of his traditional training. Eventually, he sought out native teachers in these traditions (drumming in Accra, Ghana, in 1970; gamelan in Seattle and Berkeley in 1973–1974) to gain hands-on experience. But the decisive, appetite-inducing exposure came through records. The global or "world music" orientation that Reich's music (like most minimalist music) exemplifies and serves is thus among the most palpable indications of the way recording technology redefined musical transmission in the twentieth century.

Late-twentieth-century transmission, in a word, was "horizontal." All musics past and present, nearby and far away, were, thanks to recording and communications technology, simultaneously and equally accessible to any musician in the world. The way in which this horizontal transmission supplanted the "vertical" transmission of styles in chronological single file (the assumption on which all historicist thinking depends) was the genuine musical revolution of the late twentieth century, the full implications of which will be realized only in the twenty-first and beyond. Its immediate effect on Reich, and the many composers his work has stimulated, was to convince him—to quote one of those composers, John Adams (b. 1947)—that a truly valid twentieth-century music would be "a music that is essentially percussive and pulse-generated rather than melodic and phrase-generated."<sup>19</sup>

After finishing the master's course at Mills, Reich stayed in the San Francisco Bay Area for a while and was associated, like many avant-gardists there, with the San Francisco Tape Music Center. (That was where he met and befriended Riley.) The earliest pieces of his to achieve wide notice were a pair of tape-loop compositions inspired directly by *In C*. The first, *It's Gonna Rain* (1965; originally titled "It's Gonna Rain; or, Meet Brother Walter in Union Square after Listening to Terry Riley"), was based on just the three titular words, spliced out of a recording of a gospel sermon delivered by Brother Walter, a San Francisco street preacher, in November 1964. The sermon was about Noah and the Flood. The implied warning of the title phrase, in the context of the scariest phases of the cold war like the still recent Cuban missile crisis, was timely and topical.

The other tape-loop piece, *Come Out* (1966), had a political subtext related to the civil-rights struggles of the sixties. It became Reich's breakthrough to recognition, thanks to its inclusion in one of David Behrman's Columbia records (*New Sounds in Electronic Music*, 1967). The composer's original program note described both the occasion that inspired the piece and the distinctive technical process that made it a milestone in the emergence of minimalism:

*Come Out* was composed as part of a benefit, presented at [New York's] Town Hall in April, 1966, for the re-trial, with lawyers of their own choosing, of the six boys arrested for murder during the Harlem riots of 1964. The [recorded] voice is that of Danniell Hamm, then nineteen, describing a beating he took in the Harlem 28th precinct. The police were about to take the boys out to be "cleaned up" and were only taking those that were visibly bleeding. Since Hamm had no actual open bleeding, he proceeded to squeeze open a bruise on his leg so that he would be taken to the hospital—"I had to, like, open the bruise up and let some of the bruise blood come out to show them."

The phrase "come out to show them" was recorded in both channels, first in unison and then with channel 2 slowly beginning to move ahead. As the phrase begins to shift, a gradually increasing reverberation is heard which slowly passes into a sort of canon or round. Eventually the two voices divide into four and then into eight.

By restricting oneself to a small amount of material organized by a single uninterrupted process, one's attention can become focused on details that usually slip by. A single repeated and gradually changing figure may well be heard as a composite of several figures. Finally, at any given moment, it is open to the

listener as to which pattern within the pattern he hears.<sup>20</sup>

After becoming a famous and much-interviewed figure, Reich tended to romanticize as serendipity, a happy accident, the discovery of the "phasing" process, through which identical tape loops feeding into two speakers or headphones go in and out of phase with one another (or more precisely, out and back into phase). According to one version of this much-repeated account, he intended the two channels through which he played *It's Gonna Rain* to remain synchronized, but on the cheap equipment he was using, one unexpectedly began to gain on the other. "The sensation I had in my head," as they played into the composer's earphones, "was that the sound moved over to my left ear, moved down to my left shoulder, down my left arm, down my leg, out across the floor to the left, and finally began to reverberate and shake" before it eventually "came back together in the center of my head."<sup>21</sup>

The point of the story as told and retold in retrospect is that the composer, in defiance of his modernist upbringing, was willing to decide that the phase phenomenon itself was more interesting than anything he might do with it, so he simply allowed it to play itself out. In its provocative modesty it was a genuinely avant-garde, shock-the-bourgeois gesture, and it was amply repaid with abuse from the relevant bourgeoisie, the academic modernists from whose ranks Reich had defected. They represented the status quo, he a force for change—hence a true avant-garde movement, neither conservative nor nostalgic, even though it renounced complexity and social alienation.

The controversies that swirled around minimalism when it began to have an impact confirmed the basic truth of the situation Reich's parable symbolized, but the parable as such was just a story. In fact, *It's Gonna Rain* and *Come Out* were planned from the start to exploit the "phasing" process, which Terry Riley had already discovered in a couple of tape pieces from 1964–65 that used another feedback device (somewhat more sophisticated than the echoplex), which Riley had christened the "time-lag accumulator." Reich employed a more rudimentary technology: he merely applied his thumb to the supply reel feeding the second channel to slow it slightly and allow the first to gain time. Then he rerecorded the mix of the two channels and repeated the process to produce a four-part phase texture, and then doubled it again so that eventually the sound texture consisted of eight parts in a very complex ratio of speeds. That was no serendipity: it took a great deal of premeditated labor.

Reich's phase compositions did differ considerably from Riley's, however. As Keith Potter, a historian of minimalism, emphasizes, "while Riley always allowed his patterns to accumulate into a psychedelic wash of sound, Reich generally stressed the audibility of his gradually shifting phase relations."<sup>22</sup> It was the process—inexorable and systematic—that mattered to him, because it gave the music a sense of purpose, or what Kant (as a former philosophy major like Reich would surely have remembered) called *Zweckmässigkeit*, the likeness of a purpose. For Kant that was the essence of art, and so it was for Reich.

Anything that goes back to Kant goes back to the very dawn of aesthetics. But Reich's stripped-down purposiveness differed to such a degree from the conventional expressive or formal purposes of art (to say nothing of the crasser purposes of pop) as to seem new in kind. He expounded his philosophy in a forbiddingly grim (and rather prim) essay of 1968 called "Music as a Gradual Process." "I do not mean the process of composition, but rather pieces of music that are, literally, processes," the manifesto began, and then continued in short explosive paragraphs like planks in a political platform. Here are a few:

The distinctive thing about musical processes is that they determine all the note-to-note (sound-to-sound) details and the overall form simultaneously.

I am interested in perceptible processes. I want to be able to hear the process happening throughout the sounding music.



To facilitate closely detailed listening, a musical process should happen extremely gradually. Performing and listening to a gradual musical process resembles:

pulling back a swing, releasing it, and observing it gradually come to rest; turning over an hourglass and watching the sand slowly run through to the bottom; placing your feet in the sand by the ocean's edge and watching, feeling, and listening to the waves gradually bury them.

Though I may have the pleasure of discovering musical processes and composing the musical material to run through them, once the process is set up and loaded, it runs by itself.

What I'm interested in is a compositional process and a sounding music that are one and the same thing. While performing and listening to gradual musical processes, one can participate in a particular liberating and impersonal kind of ritual. Focusing in on the musical process makes possible that shift of attention away from *he* and *she* and *you* and *me* outward toward *it*.<sup>23</sup>

The italicized *it* and the implied overcoming of self described in the last paragraph have a Zen Buddhist ring, which brings John Cage to mind. But although he acknowledged the influence of Cage on his thinking, Reich nevertheless rejected Cage's music, because "the processes he used were compositional ones that could not be heard when the piece was performed; the process of using the *I Ching* or imperfections in a sheet of paper to determine musical parameters can't be heard when listening to music composed that way."<sup>24</sup> In other words, Cageian indeterminacy had the same fatal flaw as academic serialism: "the compositional processes and the sounding music have no audible connection," and therefore, for Reich, are devoid of listening (as opposed to analytical or historical) interest.

More explicitly than most musicians at the time, Reich made a political point of this. Citing the complaint of another composer that in the kind of musical process he envisioned "the composer isn't privy to anything,"<sup>25</sup> Reich insisted that that is just the way things ought to be. The next sentence was Reich's most outspoken challenge to the reigning modernist aesthetic: "I don't know any secrets of structure that you can't hear."<sup>26</sup> The composer's implicit ascendancy over the listener was overthrown. Reich deliberately cast himself, like Schoenberg before him, as a Great Emancipator. But whereas Schoenberg (like Cage) purported to liberate sounds, Reich (like a sixties agitator) was out to liberate people.

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## Notes:

(19) John Adams, "Reich, Steve [Stephen] (Michael)," in *New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, Vol. IV (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 23.

(20) Liner note to *Odyssey Stereo 32 16 0160* (1967).

(21) Jonathan Cott, "Interview with Steve Reich," in *Steve Reich: Works 1965–1995*, booklet accompanying Nonesuch Records 7 9451-2 (set of 10 compact discs), p. 28.

(22) Potter, *Four Musical Minimalists*, p. 165.

(23) "Music as a Gradual Process" (1968), in Steve Reich, *Writings on Music 1965–2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 34–36, condensed.

(24) *Ibid.*, p. 35.

(25) James Tenney, quoted in Reich, "Music as a Gradual Process," *Writing on Music*, p. 35.

(26) "Music as a Gradual Process," *Writings on Music*, p. 35.

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