

Music and Society

The last post

Music after modernism

Edited by
Simon Miller

ppp ppp

After Modernism

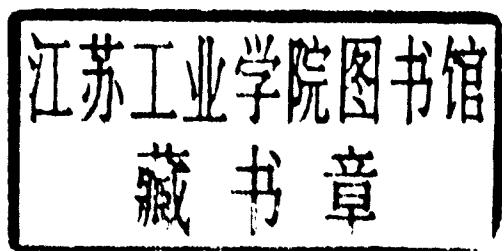
mon

28)

Edited by
Simon Miller

The last post

Music after modernism



Manchester University Press
Manchester and New York

Distributed exclusively in the USA and Canada by St. Martin's Press

Copyright © Manchester University Press 1993

Whilst copyright in the volume as a whole is vested in Manchester University Press, copyright in individual chapters belongs to their respective authors, and no chapter may be reproduced wholly or in part without the express permission in writing of both author and publisher.

Published by Manchester University Press
Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, UK
and Room 400, 175 Fifth Avenue,
New York, NY 10010, USA

Distributed exclusively in the USA and Canada
by St. Martin's Press, Inc.,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA

British Library cataloguing in publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloging in publication data applied for

ISBN 0 7190 3609 7 *hardback*

Typeset in Hong Kong
by Best-Set Typesetter Ltd, Hong Kong
Printed in Great Britain
by Biddles Ltd, Guildford and King's Lynn

Acknowledgements

This book has been some time coming to fruition. My thanks to all those who have helped me and the other contributors with its completion. To my first editor, John Banks, whose encouragement got the project off the ground. To Jo Travis and Anita Roy, his successors at MUP, and Dr Peter Martin of Manchester University who have so patiently seen the work into publication.

Dr Carolyn Brown and Professor Simon Frith provided many helpful suggestions and Sara Haworth offered support in the initial stages.

Finally, I express my gratitude to Lindsey Shaw – the editor's editor. Her love, companionship and acuity are deeply felt. My thanks to her also for compiling the index. I dedicate this work to her and to my parents Olive and Tom.

Simon Miller

Contents

Acknowledgements	vi
Introduction	1
<i>Simon Miller</i>	
Towards a hermeneutics of music	5
<i>Simon Miller</i>	
Postmodernism and art music	27
<i>Robin Hartwell</i>	
Beating new tracks: WOMAD and the British world music movement	52
<i>Peter Jowers</i>	
Culture, concept, aesthetics: the phenomenon of the African musical universe in Western musical culture	88
<i>Amon Saba Saakana</i>	
The politics of dancing – gay disco music and postmodernism	110
<i>Alexander Laski</i>	
Sexuality and musical style from Monteverdi to Mae West	132
<i>Derek Scott</i>	
Random access: music, technology, postmodernism	150
<i>Paul Théberge</i>	
Index	183

Simon Miller

Introduction

The idea for this book came from developments which have taken place in the field of art history. My own work has for a number of years focused on the relationships between the visual arts and music, and it is through contact with so called 'new art history' methodologies that I became aware of the difference in the approach to the study of the 'object' in these two disciplines. The term 'new art history' needs some definition. As Rees and Borzello write in their introduction to *The New Art History*:

Rather than a tidy description of one trend, the new art history is a capacious and convenient title that sums up the impact of feminist, marxist, structuralist, psychoanalytic, and social-political ideas on a discipline notorious for its conservative taste in art and its orthodoxy in research.¹

Until very recently the study of music has been perhaps even more 'conservative and orthodox' in its approach. This can be seen in part in the distinction that is made between musicology and music history, separating formal questions from contextual ones. We can paraphrase Roskill from his book *What is Art History?* (1974), in his description of the traditional approach to the study of the discipline, and apply it to the study of music. In this way study has most often proceeded with questions of 'style, attributions, dating, authenticity, rarity, reconstruction, the detection of forgery, the rediscovery of forgotten artists [musicians/composers] and the meanings of pictures [pieces of music]'. This last point is perhaps more problematic in the case of music, given its 'abstract' nature, and is an issue I shall discuss in Chapter 1. Such a 'conservative' approach was challenged within art history by T. J.

Clark's call, in 1972 (*The Times Literary Supplement*), for a study of the discipline which took account of the realities of the social world in which art is produced. In adopting a similar approach in relation to music, I am not suggesting that traditional approaches to the study of the subject are wrong, just that they do not ask, or are incapable of asking, a number of important and difficult questions. Such issues have even more relevance given the discussions which surround the concept of postmodernism. This idea has given rise to more overt considerations of contextual issues, which tend to challenge the predominantly formalist concerns of modernist criticism. However, the term *postmodernism* has been given widely disparate meanings by a number of authors, as is evident in the present collection. It might therefore be useful if I make clear, in brief, my own position in regard to this increasingly popular buzzword.

Firstly, I do not regard the 'postmodern condition' as culturally (or for that matter politically) all-embracing, affecting all people, destroying all meta-narratives, breaking down all cultural polarities (high/low distinctions); rather I would argue it relates to a problematic aspect of the 'contemporary condition'. It helps to frame, in other words, our difficulty in anchoring meaning within clear boundaries.

Secondly, I do not therefore regard the most significant question as just one of meaning but rather one of the relationships of meaning to questions of power and authority. Finally, I regard postmodernism as a crisis in the culture of modernism and modernisation rather than a complete rupture with it, one which maintains and appropriates aspects of modernist strategies in the process of recontextualising them.

It is particularly important to engage with these questions in relation to music-making, precisely because music has been privileged as an unproblematised paradigm, within conventional musicology; a socially and politically autonomous art (see Chapter 1). To disrupt this *telos*, to make apparent the contradictions of this project, particularly within the complex of contemporary capitalist life, is thus, I believe, politically crucial. This could take the form of a postmodernism of resistance; a recognition or celebration of diversity and difference ('otherness'), as they emerge in subjectivity, gender, sexuality, class, race and spatial (dis)locations, issues with which the different chapters are engaged; an intervention in the

nexus of social relations of production and consumption. Having outlined my own position, it is important to point out that in constructing the book I have deliberately *not* sought consensus, I have not imposed a methodology or single approach. The other writers have been free to address the questions raised by a post-modern approach in any way they saw fit. I, therefore, no more than the other contributors, necessarily agree with all the arguments and findings expressed. However, the issues raised are, I believe, significant and require engagement.

Those very few works on postmodernism that have touched on music tend to concentrate on what is generally termed 'pop' music and steer clear of the complex issues surrounding what we can refer to as 'art' music. It is this issue which Robin Hartwell takes up in his chapter. Beginning with Brahms and concluding with Schnittke, he traces a line of 'development' within the paradigms of modernism and postmodernism. Race and its relationship to contemporary sensibilities are issues addressed through different rubrics by Peter Jowers and Amon Saba Saakana. Jowers analyses the world music phenomenon within the culture of postmodernity, especially as it relates to internationalism, while Saakana takes a contentious position arguing around issues of cultural and musical appropriation. The complex surrounding music, sexuality and gender is addressed in the chapters by Alexander Laski and Derek Scott. The applicability of postmodern methodologies as they might be used in relation to gay disco music is engaged with by Laski. Scott's concern is the representation of sexuality in three different musical styles: Baroque opera, Victorian drawing-room ballads and popular music in the USA in the 1920s and 1930s. Paul Théberge's essay contextualises the role of technology: a central, practical and theoretical referent in any discussion of contemporary musical production and consumption.

Given the problems surrounding the notion of postmodernism, I believe a collection of divergent essays to be the most appropriate form for a book dealing with this subject. The book does not aim at providing answers to all the issues it raises, rather it is our aim to put a number of important questions on the agenda. The future, as always, is up for grabs. It is in my view important for musicology to enter the fight, to stake its claim and not rest content to lament the passing of traditional approaches. Of all the humanities, music could find itself best placed to trumpet the last post.

Note

- 1 A. L. Rees and Frances Borzello, ed., *The New Art History* (London, 1986), Introduction, p. 2. There have been a small number of books which offer alternative approaches to methodology within the study of music. Principal among them could be listed: J. Kerman, *Musicology* (London, 1985); J. Shepherd, *Music as Social Text* (London, 1991); C. Ballantine, *Music and its Social Meanings* (New York, 1984); C. Small, *Music-Society-Education* (London, 1980); A. Durant, *Conditions of Music* (London, 1984); R. Leppert and S. McClary, *Music and Society* (Cambridge and New York, 1987), R. Leppert, *Music and Image* (Cambridge, 1989); C. Norris, ed., *Music and the Politics of Culture* (London, 1989), and most recently Edward W. Said, *Musical Elaborations* (London, 1991).

Simon Miller

Towards a hermeneutics of music

The introduction of a new kind of music must be shunned as imperilling the whole state; since styles of music are never disturbed without affecting the most important political institutions.

The new style gradually gaining a lodgement, quietly insinuates itself into manners and customs; and from these it issues in greater force, and makes its way into mutual compacts; and from compacts it goes on to attack laws and constitutions, displaying the utmost impudence, until it ends by overturning everything, both in public and in private.¹

Discussions about the nature and existence of the concept of post-modernism have been taking place for some time now. While much ink has been spilt in the analysis of the concept in general and its application to a wide field of other cultural phenomena in particular, these discussions have notably failed to engage with the relationship between postmodernism and the art of music. This is no accident, for two different but related reasons. On the one hand, most cultural commentators, while they feel equipped to discuss a range of art practices, feel ill-prepared to venture into the sound world of music. Music more obviously constitutes itself through sometimes complex 'abstract' temporal structures, which can manifest themselves through the language of notation; a system which is known but rarely directly dealt with by cultural commentators. The myth that this therefore makes it less capable of socio-cultural analysis derives in large part from the avoidance of the teaching of the basic vocabulary of music within cultural studies. The ephemeral nature of music, its temporal quality, can be overcome by learning to explain musical experience through an understanding of this language. This is most obvious with notation, but there are other means aided by the more recent developments in recording

technology – for example the patient use of the cassette player. There are no insurmountable difficulties: musical sound is real and therefore open to analysis in a similar way to visual information – it is a different kind of object, but an object nevertheless.

On the other hand, most musicologists feel equally unequipped to tread a path through the complex minefield of post-structuralist theory. This problem is compounded by the formalist myopia of much musical study which concentrates too exclusively on questions of musical language, while making little attempt to see these formal concerns as connected in any way to larger socio-cultural forces.

The link between these two difficulties is the philosophical tradition upon which much music scholarship is founded. It makes discussion of meaning in music problematical, for this idealist tradition posits music above or beyond the workings of the socio-cultural processes in which modern cultural criticism is based, and disconnects questions of meaning from the world of most formal music criticism (at least as commonly practised within academia). This is to simplify two complex fields of study but in its broad sweep it is I believe accurate. A bridge-head is already under construction by some musicologists. It is the task of this book to further the crossing of this divide.

I shall argue that it is within an analysis of postmodernism that the study of music can be re-positioned to take account of the impact of 'extra-musical' forces and therefore re-engage with the social formation: to argue for a postmodernist as opposed to a modernist musicology.²

Within the relatively short confines of a chapter of this sort it is not possible to do more than sketch a cursory picture of the philosophical tradition mentioned above. It is my intention therefore to provide a brief survey which will attempt no more than to follow a particular line of development, and in no way pretends to cover all (or most) of the theorists in this area. Rather, I hope to provide an introduction to a set of important questions.

Platonic philosophy regarded the archetypes or the Ideas as unchanging, eternal and 'above' the universe. Below were initial blends of spirit and material, and it is here that music (and mathematics) were situated. Below these were further levels of reproduction, the site of the other arts.³ This hierarchical distinction hinged on the initial separation of spirit from body, and was centrally

important for the development of Western philosophy. It is this split which is in part responsible for the perception of music as an autonomous sphere. However, as Plato discussed at length in *The Republic*, music was seen as having a very important moral and educational role.⁴ Both Plato and Aristotle were inclined to associate the various modes with different types of feeling and character: music could move the spirit. But it could do this precisely because it was more directly associated with the archetypes.

This view was taken up by the most important musical theorist of the middle ages, Boethius, in his *De Institutione Musica*.⁵ He likewise invested music with considerable fundamental powers. Boethius introduced influential categories, organised in hierarchies, such as 'musica mundana' (the music of the spheres), 'musica humana' (the music of the elements, seasons and the human body) and instrumental music. This last category was to remain at the bottom of the hierarchy for a considerable time; it was not to take its place at the pinnacle until after the philosophy of Kant, as we shall see. But for Boethius the significant point was that music in its theoretical (Idealist) guise, following Plato, continued to stand in a closer relation to the laws of nature and the universe than any of the other arts.

However, an important shift occurs in the Renaissance. The actual practice of music (as opposed to its Idealist theoretical dimension) moves nearer to these supposed natural principles: music-making comes to be regarded as the living demonstration of the Ideal. The terms on which this shift took place continued to be Neoplatonic in character, but expanded to include a much broader conception of nature (owing to developments in the understanding of the natural world). Although music as an educational force and paradigm of the harmony of nature continued to hold sway, an important change came with the incorporation of dissonance and discord into the concept of harmony, alongside the traditional emphasis on beauty.

The concepts of consonance and dissonance have their roots in the theories attributed to Pythagoras (Chinese philosophy was aware simultaneously, if not before Pythagoras, of the laws associated with vibrating bodies). He is believed to have originated the view that the ratios between small numbers characterise concords – for example 1:2, octave, 3:2, fifth, and 4:3, fourth. This conception was also manifest in the visual arts, especially in the ideas

of Alberti, particularly in relation to architecture;⁶ in this way, in the words of Wittkower, 'A familiarity with musical theory became a *sine qua non* of artistic education' for Renaissance artists and thinkers.⁷ In short, and this is a point to which I shall return, music and mathematics were intimately linked: geometry was the key to the universe, and music was the geometry of sound: number made aural (perhaps most clearly seen in the work of Alberti's older contemporary Ugolino of Orvieto).⁸ It was with developments in harmonic and polyphonic techniques that this tension between theory and practice became most obvious, for it was here that traditional theoretical conceptions of consonance rubbed up against the *secunda prattica* of dissonance; as a consequence a broader concept of 'natural' harmony developed. Discord became an accepted stylistic device.

Nevertheless, although Renaissance philosophy could subsume, to some extent, the polarities of consonance and dissonance, this did not mean a break with the objective science of numbers. Beauty became the result of harmony between contrasts. Perhaps the clearest practical outcome of these developments can be seen in the revision of the practice of tempering. Here less strict mathematical (though mathematical nevertheless) accordance – based more on judgements of the ear – allowed excursions from the modal norm into the area of harmonic chromaticism. This marked a shift to the systematic evaluation of experience, and brings us to the emphasis on empiricism which marked the rise of science at the birth of the modern age (or the Classical age if we follow Foucault's chronology).⁹

Whatever the nomenclature, this period is in philosophical terms most often associated with the work of Descartes. His specific writings on music continued mathematical speculation on the concepts of consonance and dissonance but in a way significantly different from earlier speculation. His earliest work *Musica compendium* (*Musical Compendium*, written in 1618, but published only after his death in 1650)¹⁰ and his last work *Les Passions de l'âme* (*The Passions of the Soul*, published in 1649) contain his most significant contributions to music theory.¹¹ The *Compendium* is a mathematical study of the laws of acoustics and harmony, which does not attempt to apply them to responses, whereas the *Passions* considers the physics and physiology of affects, but without direct application to music. The important difference between Descartes'

approach and earlier speculation is in his reluctance to equate mathematically derived harmony with musical pleasure. Following the shift I mentioned earlier the experience of the listener plays a more significant role: 'to determine what is most pleasant we have to know the listener's disposition, which varies, like taste, from person to person'.¹²

Significantly he differentiated between the simplicity, the harmony of a consonance, and its 'agreeableness'. This had the effect of placing the affects of music firmly within the soul (within fixed categories), and it is because of the dualism of the soul (mind) and the body (world), as he famously postulated them, that a distance is maintained from the world (the everyday), and therefore the epistemological division I have so far described – between music and social life – continued to hold sway.

The music theorist Johann Mattheson should also be briefly mentioned, for he is perhaps the most significant musical empiricist of the eighteenth century.¹³ He modelled his ideas on the writings of Locke and Bacon, and delivered a considerable blow to Pythagorean notions of the primacy of mathematics in music, pursuing and greatly extending the role of experience that I mentioned above in reference to Descartes. The basis of his argument was that since everything in the mind must first enter through the senses – science originating in observation – the ear is the prime judge of all musical experiences: 'the sense of hearing resident in the soul [is] the best judge in this matter'.¹⁴ Therefore, he argued, previous reliance on mathematics for music was, in short, misguided. Although this may appear to contradict my assertions so far – for it is contrary to the numerological emphasis of the Pythagorean tradition – it is I believe consistent in at least one important respect. It is the other side of the same epistemological coin, for in its positioning of the unmediated soul at the heart of the understanding of musical experiences it maintains separation. Mattheson is left relying heavily on the Cartesian concept of passions, which, as I have already mentioned, limits understanding to questions of taste and the 'natural' sensibilities of each individual. Nevertheless, the mathematically informed approach to music was soon to reassert itself. Its most well known and influential rebirth was brought about by the early Enlightenment composer and theorist Jean-Phillippe Rameau.

As mentioned above, the importance of mathematically derived

theories of music lies in their perceived natural, objective and universal validity. Rameau is particularly important in the emphasis he placed on the primacy of reason over experience. This distinguishes him from empiricists like Mattheson and links him to the mathematically inspired Cartesian tradition. His ideas, as expressed primarily in his less than lucid *Traité de l'harmonie* (*Treatise on Harmony*, 1722 which has the significant additional phrase, *Reduced to its natural principles*), show him to be an archetypal Enlightenment thinker through his reliance on science as a validating system, where reason is validated by experience:

The surviving writings of the Ancients show us clearly that reason alone enabled them to discover most of the properties of music. Although experience still obliges us to accept the greater part of their rules, we neglect today all the advantages to be derived from the use of reason in favour of purely practical experience . . .

Music is a science which should have definite rules; these rules should be drawn from an evident principle; and this principle cannot really be known without the aid of mathematics. Notwithstanding all the experience I may have acquired in music from being associated with it for so long, I must confess that only with the aid of mathematics did my ideas become clear and did light replace a certain obscurity of which I was unaware before.¹⁵

By reference to the wisdom of the ancients, Rameau draws a line of historical progress. He validates his position by rooting it in the past, adding his derivation of rules based on the natural principles of vibrating bodies (*corps sonore*). The mathematical precision and rational justification of his ideas together contribute to split, in Cartesian terms, the body (experience) from the mind (reason/intellect), and in musical terms place the triad as the foundation of harmony. Such an approach helps to present his argument as both historically justifiable, 'natural', and therefore by implication, morally good. These notions are all in general central to the Enlightenment project, and therefore important to understanding the attack postmodernism has launched against this conception. I shall return to this challenge, but first I will continue the brief historical survey of the theoretical arguments which have acted to hold music aloof from the workings of everyday life and experience.

Kant's complex philosophy emerged out of the rationalism of Descartes and the empiricism of Locke and Hume. No attempt here will be made to summarise Kant's ideas (any more than those

of the other philosophers so far discussed); rather we shall be concerned only with the core of his arguments as they affect the present discussion – music and its relationship to social life. As already discussed, instrumental music (music in its most ‘abstract’ form) was most often regarded as inferior to other forms of music. This was because questions of content (and therefore control over meaning) were seen as most problematic in relation to determining the true nature of this branch of the art. In other words, exact readings of meaning were not possible except in relation to language (libretto); instrumental music had no fixed signified and therefore could affect the passions but in the process bypassed conscious understanding. This is not to argue that music was up to this time considered to be autonomous in relation to the world and nature, rather that it had a particular relationship which maintained a type of separation. For example, within the Pythagorean tradition music was seen as having, through number, a natural relation with nature and the universe, but one at such a level of abstraction that it stood in an ideal, rather than real (everyday), relationship to human life, as a mimesis of the archetypes. Kant is important to our argument because he freed (instrumental) music, and allowed it to be ‘honestly’ autonomous. He distinguishes between two forms of beauty in his *Critique of Judgement* – free beauty and dependent beauty:

The first presupposes no concept of what the object ought to be; the second does presuppose such a concept and the perfection of the object therein . . . foliage for borders or wall papers, mean nothing in themselves; they represent nothing – no object under a definite concept – and are free beauties. We can refer to the same class what are called in music phantasies (i.e. pieces without any theme), and in fact all music without words.

In the judging of a free beauty (according to the mere form), the judgement of taste is pure.¹⁶

This formalist emancipation for music from language also frees music from concepts. As a result it ranks at the bottom of artistic hierarchies for Kant, because of this perceived conceptual poverty. This is important because as a result music becomes paradigmatic in another way: it is both subjective and universal. Music (and art) has become separated from the cognitive and moral spheres of influence, it affects our feelings but not our minds:

[the art of tone] . . . speaks by means of mere sensation without concepts, and so does not, like poetry, leave anything over for reflection . . . It is, however, rather enjoyment than cultivation (the further play of thought that is excited by its means is merely the effect of a, as it were, mechanical association), and in the judgement of reason it has less worth than any other of the beautiful arts.¹⁷

Kant's argument, though not his pejorative placing of music within an artistic hierarchy, was to have a profound effect on future generations of theorists. Within Romanticism music's autonomous nature was to justify its place as paradigmatic among the arts: as Schiller expressed it: 'The plastic arts, at their most perfect, must become music and move us by the immediacy of their sensuous presence.'¹⁸ Writers such as Tieck, Wackenroder, and E. T. A. Hoffmann argued that symphonic instrumental music ('absolute music' as Wagner coined the term) was the art of arts because of its perceived innocence of reference to the external world, and its power to suggest because of its indefinite nature.

The emphasis placed on the subjective power of music within Idealist philosophy of necessity regards music as objectless and immediate in its effects. However, as I mentioned at the outset of this chapter music is an object; it exists outside, external to the subject – although this is not to argue that meaning is inherent in the object, except in a limited formal sense (as physical characteristics); it is rather constituted through contexts of production and reception. As Lucy Green has recently argued:

The subject structures its intentions towards music according to what it knows of music. If confounded by processual change in the musical structure, subjective intentionality is negated and restructured on the basis of new knowledge; if realised by the musical structure, intentionality is processually affirmed.¹⁹

In other words music is a temporal structure, one that is comprehended on the basis of previous knowledge (particularly in terms of an understanding of categories of style). Listening to music is an exploratory process that involves both memory and the anticipation of future events. The conceptual error, of not conceiving of music as an object, not only allows music to be conceived as autonomous from the world (of objects), but as we have seen, also leaves it conceptless, or to put it more strongly, meaningless.