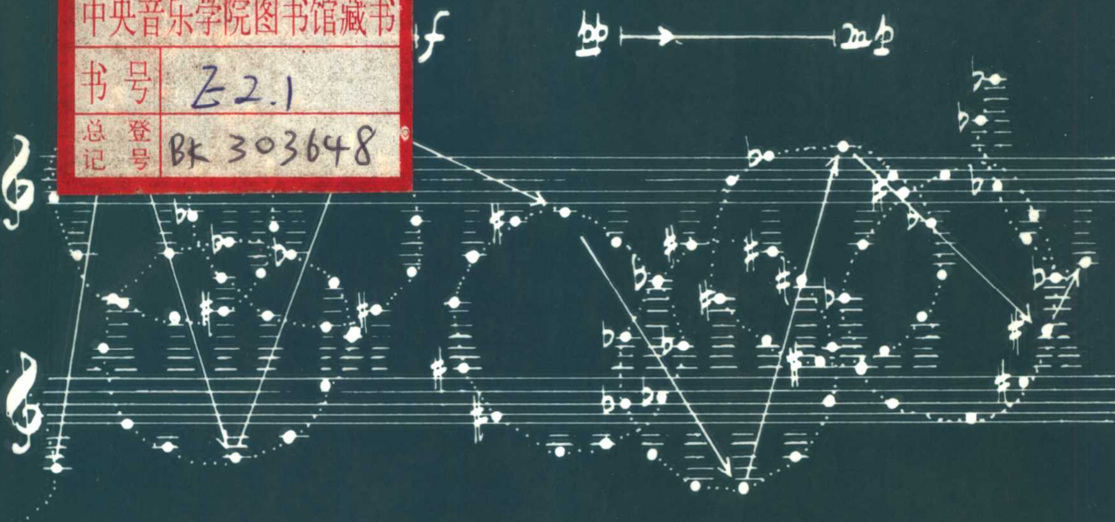

PAUL GRIFFITHS

MODERN MUSIC AND AFTER

DIRECTIONS SINCE 1945

CLARENDON PAPERBACKS

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PAUL GRIFFITHS

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PRELUDE

I began this book—before arriving at the beginning now beginning—as a simple updating of my *Modern Music*, which I had finished in 1979. But the infant with whom that earlier survey had, to quote from its dedication, 'a race to delivery', is now nearing manhood, and a comparable change seemed to be demanded of the book—demanded by the last fifteen years of composition, by the progress of scholarship, and by the altered view of distance.

The original *Modern Music*, with a title that seemed either quaint or defensive in a world waking to postmodernism, viewed the period since 1945 as divided into two phases. One, lasting until around 1960, was governed by hopes for a constant progressive change in the nature of music, in the routines of composing, and in music's place within society. Because those hopes were widely shared, they encouraged an uncommon profusion of alliances—an urge that may have been intensified by the fact that so many of the leading composers of these years were men (rarely women) who were in their twenties, and therefore susceptible to fantasies of group identity. And because the hopes sometimes seemed more important than the music—as if what was written could only be a sketch towards some grand future project—they also generated a quite unusual quantity of verbal justification, in the form of analytical articles, treatises of composition, declarations of aesthetic intent, and polemical counterblasts. It was a time of vigorous bonding, fierce denunciation and conspicuous theorizing (there are close parallels with what was going on within the left-wing politics of the time). Only the energy of reconstruction—the drive to build a better musical future, to reach new promised lands—was beyond dispute. That energy, that drive, made the passage of time feel urgent and forward-moving, and something of the same dynamic was maintained when, as inevitably happened, the differences among composers began to overwhelm the mutualities, and the single history of the late 1940s and 1950s was succeeded in the next two decades by a knotted web of arrows—a web which the second part of *Modern Music* tried to expose in a sequence of traverses rather than a solitary narrative line.

This new version of the book maintains the earlier two-part structure, and adds to it a third part concerning music since the late 1970s. The three parts cover roughly equal periods of time, but not at equal length, for various reasons. With the passage of time, music grows, enriched by performance, by interpretation, by the effect it has on subsequent music: the music of the late 1940s and 1950s thereby commands more attention here than the spring grass of the 1990s. Also, that immediate postwar music is unusually big in its achievements, deep in its questions, and long in its implications. Just as a book on the music of the first half of the nineteenth century would have to give disproportionate weight to the period up to 1828, so this one is bottom-heavy. Reasons of convenience, too, have sometimes pulled later music into the first part—though they have also sometimes pulled earlier music into later parts. We live among many simultaneous histories: there is the chronology of when things get composed, when they get performed, when they get to seem important, when they get to seem important specifically to each of us. The book does not—could not—iron out these tangles.

The entire text has been radically overhauled, in order to take some account both of new research and of a broader view that now seems appropriate, even if the book's heart remains in much the same place. That broader view is necessary because not only has musical confusion—which one may at different times consider a cause for wonder, bewilderment or alarm—gone on increasing during the last decade and a half, but its effect has been to call into question the 1950s belief in musical progress. There has been time for alternative traditions to grow up and separate themselves, so that by now the pathways have forked so far that they have lost the memory of any common origin. Looking back from the present situation of, say, Arvo Pärt or Ellen Taaffe Zwilich, *Le marteau sans maître* might seem an alien curiosity: Vivaldi and Pérotin are nearer precursors for the one, Mahler and Shostakovich for the other. Where, in the 1950s, composers as diverse as Boulez, Cage, and Babbitt all recognized Schoenberg, Webern, and Varèse as among their godfathers, the only common view now is that there is no common view. Out of the muddled present we see a muddled past.

An observer may still believe that the challenges of the 1950s—the challenges of self-awareness, of commitment to change and discovery, of exacting precision—remain, and that 'modernism' is not just a style among others but an imperative that goes on being answered, however variously, in the music, say, of Babbitt, Birtwistle, Ferneyhough, Kurtág, and Ligeti. A historian, though, must record other possibilities, even if no history can hope to be other than partisan—as this history is for several reasons.

One of these must be, banally, the sheer quantity of serious music now being written. In the 1950s and 1960s the principal media of musical dissemination—records, radio concerts, festivals—were dominated by two dozen or so international figures. Most of those composers remain at the forefront: the big names of the 1950s are still the big names of the 1990s. But they have been joined by many thousands of composers whose works have at least intermittent exposure, with the result that nobody can claim familiarity with more than a small part of what is a constantly growing musical universe. Nor can we have too much confidence in time's winnowing. The experience of the last fifteen years has been rather that the repertory constantly increases, as a result both of living composers' activities, and of perpetual revivals from the immediate past. What anyone knows will be governed partly by nationality, partly by opportunity, and partly by taste.

The role of taste is something else that must render any history of modern music illusory. The great hope of the immediate postwar years was to eliminate the functioning of taste, either by establishing axioms whose historical necessity and rational fitness would be bound to command general agreement (as Boulez and Babbitt hoped) or by accepting any material as musical (which was Cage's only rule). But when music is so diverse, taste gains a worrying force over composers and listeners, and indeed over critics and historians. Admiration for—to return to an earlier example—*Le marteau sans maître,* can be justified on the grounds of the work's supremacy in answering what were current questions of compositional technique and aesthetics. But today, when it is hard enough to find the questions, subjective criteria of appreciation become overwhelming. The problem then—and it is a problem each one of us must address—is that of how to be more than a consumer at the great feast of contemporary music, how to create, almost as a composition itself, a listening life that is integrated and yet also responsive to the age's diversity and abundance.

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It was in Paris, during these immediate postwar years, that the last phase of modern music began—that the last effort to alter music radically, and even to set the art on a new course, had its most conspicuous and decisive origin. Though musical life had continued during the German occupation, the ending of the war was an incentive to breathe again, and then to change the world. In Paris, too, as throughout the previous Nazi empire, liberation made it possible to perform, discuss, and hear music that had been banned for being adventurous or Jewish or, to take the prominent case of Schoenberg, both. The moment, then, was right. And there were the right people to take possession of the moment. Olivier Messiaen (1908–92) during these years was composing his largest and most elaborate work so far, the *Turangalîla* symphony, a composition to crown his earlier achievements and at the same time display new concerns he shared with the young pupils who had gathered around him at the Paris Conservatoire. Pierre Boulez (b. 1925), the most gifted of those pupils, was meanwhile producing the first pieces by which he would wish to be known, graduating from the miniature *Notations* for piano (1945) to the four-movement Second Piano Sonata (1946–8), which brought his early style to a climax of formal sophistication and expressive vehemence. Finally, the year of the sonata's completion also saw the creation by Pierre Schaeffer (b. 1910), working in the studios of Radiodiffusion-Télévision Française, of the first essays in *musique concrète*, music made by transforming recorded sounds and composed not on to paper but on to the heavy black discs of the contemporary gramophone.

Boulez's Early Works

Boulez, who studied with Messiaen during the academic year 1944–5, later wrote an appreciation of his teacher which eloquently conveys the atmosphere in which musical revolution was being prepared: 'Names that were all but forbidden, and works of which we knew nothing, were held up for our admiration and were to arouse our intellectual curiosity . . . Africa and Asia showed us that the prerogatives of "tradition" were not confined to any one part of the world, and in our enthusiasm we came to regard music as a way of life rather than an art: we were marked for life.'[1]

[1] 'A Class and Its Fantasies', *Orientations* (London, 1986), 404; the piece was originally published as a tribute to Messiaen on his fiftieth birthday. See also 'In Retrospect', ibid. 405–6.

In the case of Boulez himself, at least, the admiration and the curiosity did not wash away—rather they intensified—a need to challenge, even to reject. It was through admiration and curiosity that Boulez was led to recognize his musical forefathers, but it was through challenge and rejection that he was led to recognize himself. In his later career as a conductor, he has performed neither the *Trois petites liturgies* (1943–4) nor the complete *Turangalîla* (1946–8), preferring the scores Messiaen wrote in the 1950s and 1960s—scores arguably influenced by his own music. At the time, the echo of Messiaen's modes remained detectable in his compositions only because those modes were being so punishingly negated, and for several years the pupil was expressly hostile to his erstwhile master. In a critical paragraph from one of his earliest essays, published in 1948, he concluded that Messiaen 'does not compose—he juxtaposes'.[2]

To some extent, the hostility was the display of a delayed adolescence; it was also a necessary fuel for the young composer's creative zeal. Boulez formed himself in explosive reaction against what he found around him—not just the dusty Conservatoire but Messiaen, Schoenberg, Berg, Bartók, Stravinsky, all of whom were furiously taken to task in the polemical articles he wrote during his twenties, just as they were being implicitly taken to task in his compositions of those years. His most typical way of arguing on behalf of his music was to show how it realized potentialities that had been glimpsed by his predecessors but fudged by them for want of perspicacity or intellectual bravery. For example, the same essay that criticizes Messiaen the 'juxtaposer'—an essay devoted to finding a way forward for rhythm—admonishes Bartók for having a rhythmic style 'much simpler and more traditional' than that of *The Rite of Spring*, Jolivet because 'his empirical technique has prevented him from going very far', Messiaen for failing to integrate rhythm and harmony, Schoenberg and Berg because they 'remain attached to the classical bar and the old idea of rhythm', and Varèse 'for spiriting away the whole problem of technique . . . [:] a facile solution which solves nothing'. Even Webern—whom the young Boulez took as a touchstone of unflinching modernism, and whom he was at pains to isolate from other members of that crucial grandfatherly generation as the only exemplar[3]—even Webern is glancingly, parenthetically chided for 'his attachment to rhythmic tradition'.

Messiaen recalled that during this period Boulez 'was in revolt against everything';[4] Boulez himself remembers that 'it was our privilege to make the discoveries and also to find ourselves faced with nothing'.[5] The artist who is 'against everything' can, by virtue of that, look around him and find 'nothing'. Boulez's iconoclasm was perhaps extreme, but not exceptional for a self-confident young man in his late teens and early twenties. What was exceptional was the fact that

[2] 'Proposals', *Stocktakings from an Apprenticeship* (Oxford, 1991).

[3] See e.g. his 1952 essay 'Possibly . . .' (ibid. 114), and the conclusion of his 1961 encyclopaedia entry on Webern (ibid. 303).

[4] Claude Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color* (Portland, Oreg., 1994), 182.

[5] *Orientations*, 445.