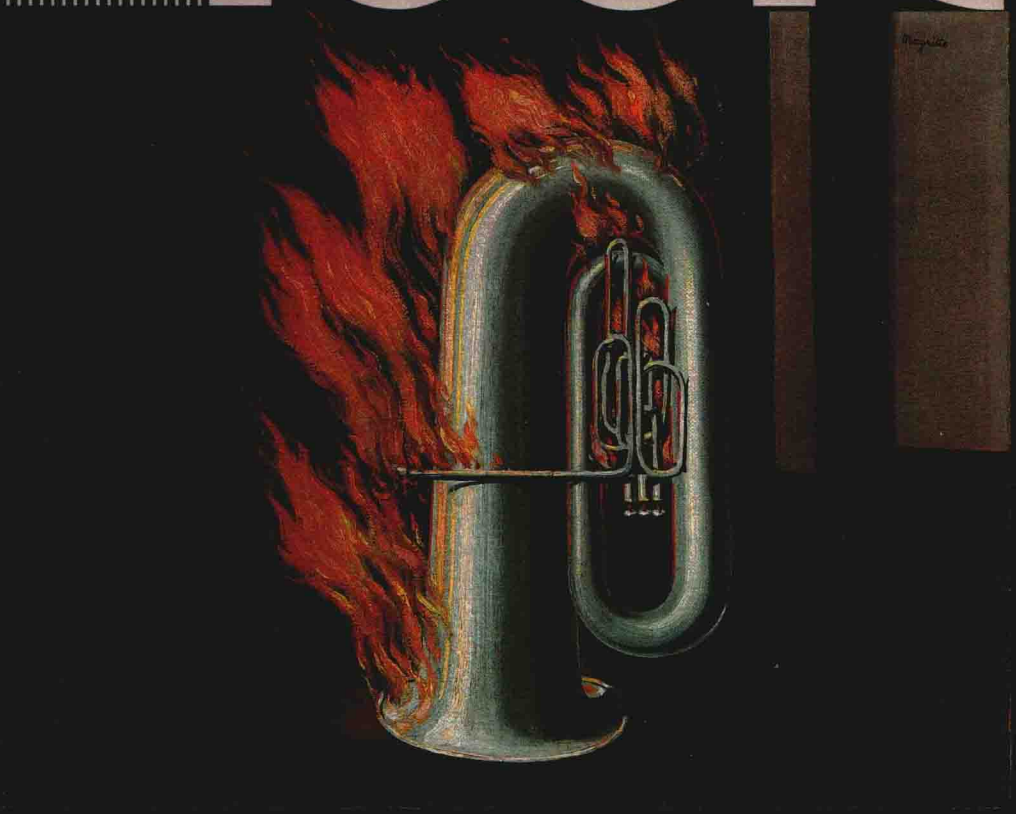
AN ANTHOLOGY OF SOURCES

modernism and MUSIC



edited and with a commentary by **daniel albright**

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Edited and with Commentary by Daniel Albright

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Daniel Albright is professor of English and American Literature at Harvard University. He is the author of *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts*, also published by the University of Chicago Press.

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[ON THE ANTIQUITY OF THE MODERN]

As I was due to take part in these festivities with you, dear guests, I was in the vestibule, on the point of coming upstairs, when—just listen to this peculiar tale—I was approached by an old man in a hat so wide you could have cooked cabbage in it, with a decrepit old beard and scholar's robes. He was carrying a huge bundle of yellowing old paper strung across his body from his rump to his left shoulder, and addressed me in these words: "Go no further, O PLEASURE! You are not expected here, for the Author did not wish to have me as Master of the Music—I whom the theoreticians call RIGOR—, thus openly flouting the chromatic and harmonic rules which give all true music its harmony and reason; he has replaced them with harsh, uncouth proportions, composed diatonically, with no regard for reason. So if indeed you are PLEASURE, turn back, for in this place there can be no place for you."

After listening to this impudent chatter, I looked at him darkly and gave him an answer he certainly wasn't expecting: "I am PLEASURE, but the MODERN kind. I'll have you know that the Author—none other than myself, if the truth be told—may not have obeyed the rules on your bits of paper; but he claims to have done well nevertheless, and you, with all your hair-splitting and caviling, you insinuate that modern composers should go along with your antiquated nonsense. Oh, how amazed you would be if you realized that out of a hundred intelligent people, ninety are quite happy to accept the great precept: *Everything new gives pleasure.*

So my advice to you, O ANTIQUE RIGOR, is to sell your old papers to a grocer—they will make a most excellent brine for his sardines, tuna, herrings and caviar in no time."

His impudent nonsense started up all over again, whereupon I was inspired by a brilliant idea and returned his fire with a shower of black notes: *Oh, what a big nose.*

Prologue, Adriano Banchieri, *Festino nella sera del Giovedì Grasso avanti Cena* [*Fête for the Evening of Carnival Thursday, before Supper*], 1608, trans. John Sidgwick.

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1 Introduction

Terms such as "modern" and "Modernism" seem to possess a certain security, even prestige, but they were long regarded with suspicion. Shakespeare used "modern" to mean commonplace—in his day, the word was uncomfortably close in meaning to "trivial." The culture of the Renaissance, like that of the eighteenth century, tended to revere the classical, the ancient; something that was modern (a word derived from *modus,* that is, fashion) was merely fashionable, transitory, perhaps gaudy, like an ostrich plume on a hat. To praise an excellent book, one compared it to the work of Horace or Cicero; to praise an excellent sculpture, one compared it to the work of Greek antiquity, which survived (in Roman copies) throughout Europe.

But the situation in music was a little different. Musical compositions could not be judged against models from remote antiquity. Certainly composers could evoke standards of comparison from classical Greece, as when Antoine Busnoys, in his motet *In hydraulis* (written before 1467), looked to Pythagoras for sanction for the polyphonic art that he, Busnoys, had inherited from Johannes Ockeghem. But no one knew what Greek music sounded like; and Busnoys could scarcely have imagined that Pythagoras, long before the birth of Christ, devised on his one-stringed lyre a music as intricate as that of the fifteenth century. From before the Renaissance until the later eighteenth century, music was usually modern. Plainchant persisted in church services; Gregorio Allegri's *Miserere* continued to be sung in the Vatican; the operas of Jean-Baptiste Lully held the stage long after the composer's death; but, for the most part, music meant new music. The art of music evolved so rapidly, and with such a strong general presupposition that the newer was *better* than the older, that the reverence for the classical, so common in other artistic media, was as much a matter of lip service as a matter of actual practice.

When, in the late nineteenth century, the artistic movement we call Modernism began, music was the artistic medium best equipped to participate, since it had always tended to assign privilege to the up to date and the novel. Music has always been the most temporally immediate of the arts, the medium most sensitive to the Now. And it is not surprising that, at the dawn of the twentieth century, music became the vanguard medium of the Modernist aesthetic.

The sudden importance of music was itself something new. For most of the history of Western art, music seemed somewhat slow to respond to advances in the other artistic media: in the words of Pierre Boulez, "we are always being told that musicians lag

behind their literary rivals and colleagues."[1] For example, scholars of literature might date the beginning of the Renaissance from the time of Dante and Petrarch, in the fourteenth century, whereas scholars of music might date the beginning of the Renaissance from the time of Guillaume Dufay, a whole century later; similarly, the Romantic movement in literature was losing impetus by the time of the deaths of E. T. A. Hoffmann (1822), Lord Byron (1824), and Jean Paul (1825), that is, approximately the moment when musical Romanticism was catching fire, in the impassioned works of Schubert, Bellini, Berlioz, and others. But in the universe of Modernism, music shook off its belatedness, and took charge.

There are many signs that music is now the instigator, not the sluggish follower. For example, in 1925 T. S. Eliot wrote *The Hollow Men* ("We are the stuffed men . . . Headpiece filled with straw") partly in response to the eerie energy of the marionette in Stravinsky's 1911 ballet *Petrushka;*[2] and in 1947, W. H. Auden—arguably the most distinguished English poet of the generation following Eliot—wrote a letter concerning the proposed opera *The Rake's Progress* in which he told Stravinsky, "I need hardly say that the chance of working with you is the greatest honor of my life."[3] But well before Eliot's or Auden's time, literary folk were starting to bow to composers. When the poet Charles Baudelaire attended, in 1861, the new version of Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser,* he felt that he was hearing something that should change the evolution of literature. When the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche published his first book, in 1872, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music,* he prophesied that Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* (1865) would inaugurate a rebirth of the Dionysiac energy that informs all artistic and intellectual achievement. In the next year, 1873, Walter Pater published *The Renaissance,* in which he argued that "*All art constantly aspires toward the condition of music.*"[4] The italics are Pater's own, and the prose style of his book, sinuously gorgeous, suggests that Pater was himself trying to write a text that sounds like music.

Already by the 1870s the prestige of the composer was so great that some poets, particularly in France, were starting to conceive themselves as surrogate composers, composers *manqués:* Paul Verlaine begins his "Art poétique" (1874) with the line "Before everything else, music"; and Stéphane Mallarmé writes, in "L'après-midi d'un faune" (1876),

1. Pierre Boulez, *Orientations: Collected Writings,* ed. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, trans. Martin Cooper (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 208.

2. B. C. Southam, *A Guide to the Selected Poems of T. S. Eliot* (San Diego: Harvest, 1994), 210.

3. Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Memories and Commentaries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 155.

4. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance,* ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 106.

Inerte, tout brûle dans l'heure fauve
Sans marquer par quel art ensemble détala
Trop d'hymen souhaité de qui cherche le *la*

Torpid, all things burn in that wild hour
Not noting how the too-much-marriage slipped away
Desired by the one who seeks the A

These lines are so shadowy, so evacuated of solid objects and determinate meaning, that they become correspondingly rich in musical suggestiveness; the only conspicuous feature in the poem is the faun's piercing A♮. Debussy's famous *Prélude* (1894) seems designed to tease out of Mallarmé's poem the music already latent within it.

The essays gathered in this anthology reflect a sense, not always present in the pre-Modernist world, that the composer is an important person whose words should be pondered carefully—and not just by other artists, but also by the general public. The Modernist composer is typically an intellectual—a pontificator at large, orating on the largest stages. Some of these composers took a strong interest in politics: Arnold Schoenberg, for example, wrote to a newspaper on the difficulties of writing an international hymn for peace (1928) and even wrote a play, *The Biblical Way* (1926–27), concerning the establishment of a Zionist homeland in Africa. Charles Ives corresponded with William Howard Taft in 1920 to gain his support for a constitutional amendment to combine presidential elections with a national referendum.

But the twentieth-century composer is rarely a crusader, and still more rarely a successful crusader: Schoenberg's play ends with the failure of the Moses figure to achieve what he worked for; and Taft brusquely dismissed Ives's plan for majoritarian rule. Typically, the composer tries to effect change in the larger culture not by direct action but by illustrating technical possibilities for advancement in the arts and letters—by exploring regions of liberation undreamed of in previous ages. The Modernist composer devises theories, theories that themselves become forms of action, forms of art. As music starts to become self-consciously smart—intricate, cerebral, generated from pre-compositional ideas—the composer starts to become engaged with every sort of intellectual activity, from philosophy to sociology; musical compositions become models for problem-solving, as if music were a species of thinking carried out by other means.

The clearest nineteenth-century prefiguration of the Modernist composer-intellectual can be found in the example of Richard Wagner: not only a political rebel who fled Germany after a warrant was issued for his arrest during the upheavals of 1848–49, but also a man who felt free to opine in print on every subject under the sun, such as the origins of classical Greek drama in folk art; the corruption of European culture by Jews; the relation between early Christian asceticism and Buddhist rejection of desire; the

psychoacoustics of alliteration in German verse; and the role of dreaming in the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. Before Wagner's time, when composers felt impelled to write, they usually wrote treatises on harmony (Johannes Tinctoris, Jean-Philippe Rameau) or practical advice for instrumentalists (Leopold Mozart, Johann Joachim Quantz). But Wagner was an intellectual-at-large, confrontational and sometimes erudite, whose public presence was more like that of Jean-Paul Sartre than like that of a musician trying to improve performance standards.

Wagner, of course, wrote a great deal about music, but much of his speculation concerns the music of the past and the music of the future; earlier composers, by contrast, tended to be interested in questions pertinent to the immediate present—questions of writing a fugue that offends no one's ears, or of properly differentiating legato, spiccato, and staccato when playing a violin. For Wagner, music is not an art of evanescent compositions, sounds that reverberate a moment and then die away, but an art of timeless masterpieces: Wagner (and in this respect he resembles Felix Mendelssohn and Johannes Brahms) devoted much energy to rehabilitating the music of the past, by editing Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina's Stabat Mater, or by preparing a new German performing edition of Christoph Willibald Gluck's *Iphigenia in Aulis.* Even in the eighteenth century there were tentative signs that a canon of classic music was taking shape, immune from time's ravages: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, for example, evidently added his own adagios (K. 404a) to some fugues from J. S. Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier,* and certainly rewrote George Frideric Handel's *Acis and Galatea* and *Messiah* for the orchestra of his own time; but the nineteenth and twentieth centuries bear most of the responsibility for giving music a history, for making music more than thirty years old part of the normal experience of listening. Sometimes nineteenth- and twentieth-century composers even wrote music *about* music history: an early example is Louis Spohr's Sixth Symphony (1840), the *Historical* Symphony, which recapitulates the evolution of the art. The first movement is called the "Bach-Handel Period," the second the "Haydn-Mozart Period," the scherzo the "Beethoven Period," and the finale "The Newest of the New," a movement that sounds perhaps like the operas of Daniel François Auber; it is hard to be certain whether Spohr treats this ultra-modern stuff respectfully or sneers at it for being laboriously trivial. Nowadays we often deplore the fact that the life of the concert hall and opera house is a museum culture, in which recently written works are rarely heard; but the older sort of culture, in which concertgoers sometimes heard *only* recently written works, was (as Spohr tried to show) a still unhealthier situation.

■ If the caricature of the Romantic composer is the eccentric genius or mesmerizing satyr—Paganini or Liszt playing with fingers inhumanly long—the caricature of the Modernist composer is a sort of scientist, conducting, with scalpels of sound, research into the darkest regions of the human psyche. Schoenberg seems to join Sigmund Freud

(and the painter Edvard Munch and the novelist Joseph Conrad) in a common project to map areas of feeling little explored in previous ages. The Modernist composer is considered the master of an arcane and forbidding art, like tensor calculus; as the elderly Schoenberg wrote, reviewing his career, there was a time "when everybody made believe he understood Einstein's theories and Schoenberg's music."[5] Modernist music (according to the cartoon version) may provide exquisite pleasure to those of refined taste, who enjoy tone clusters, irregular rhythms, and bizarre timbres, but sounds intolerably shrill, aggressive, aimless, banging, to normal people who like good tunes with dominant seventh chords and clear cadences. The nineteenth-century composer always has a full head of hair, or at least a long beard; but the twentieth-century composer has the bald pate of Schoenberg or Igor Stravinsky or Sergei Prokofiev or Paul Hindemith, as well as the severe scowl of Anton Webern, appropriate for a music that seems to reject all ornament and charm in favor of research into the essence of things, the phonic equivalent of the physics of subatomic particles. The purpose of the earlier composers (speaking very roughly) was to *praise:* to praise God, to congratulate the Hamburg city council, to sing happy birthday to the king's eleven-year-old son, to provide cheer at the local university's commencement ceremony; the purpose of the nineteenth-century composer was to *move,* to make the audience shudder, weep, break out in laughter; but the purpose of the twentieth-century composer seems to be to *think,* to provide transcendental philosophy with fretful and opaque analogues in sound.

How much truth is there in these caricatures of Modernism? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to study its central assumption: that Modernist art is *difficult.*

Perhaps the classic statement of this assumption occurs in T. S. Eliot's essay "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921): "it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult.* Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results."[6] Those who discuss Modernism in music have tended to agree. The well-informed and taxonomically passionate musicologist Carl Dahlhaus, for example, argues that composers are Modernist if they are progressive:

> The year 1890 . . . lends itself as an obvious point of historical discontinuity. . . . The "breakthrough" of Mahler, Strauss, and Debussy implies a profound historical transformation. . . . If we were to search for a name to convey the breakaway mood of the 1890s (a mood symbolized musically by the opening bars of Strauss's *Don Juan* [1888]) but without imposing a fictitious unity of style on the age, we could do worse

5. Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea: Selected Writings of Arnold Schoenberg,* ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 51–52.

6. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1960), 248.