

Arnold Whittall

Exploring Twentieth-Century Music

Tradition and Innovation



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In this wide-ranging book, Arnold Whittall considers a group of important composers of the twentieth century, including Debussy, Webern, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Bartók, Janáček, Britten, Carter, Birtwistle, Andriessen and Adams. He moves skilfully between the cultural and the technical, the general and the particular, to explore the various contexts and critical perspectives which illuminate certain works by these composers. Considering the extent to which place and nationality contribute to the definition of musical character, he investigates the relevance of such images as mirroring and symmetry, the function of genre and the way types of identity may be suggested by such labels as classical, modernist, secular, sacred, radical, traditional. These categories are considered as flexible and interactive and they generate a wide-ranging series of narratives delineating some of the most fundamental forces which affected composers and their works within the complex and challenging world of the twentieth century.

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Preface

Exploring Twentieth-Century Music stems from a series of six one-hour lectures I gave in London between October 2000 and March 2001. I am greatly indebted to the Society for Music Analysis, and to Royal Holloway, University of London, for supporting and promoting the lectures. In particular, my warmest thanks go to John Rink, Robert Pascall and their colleagues for their initiative and generosity, with respect both to the lectures and to this publication. I also owe a particular debt to Jonathan Dunsby for his invaluable comments on a draft of the present text.

The form and content of this book has grown out of the form and content of the lectures. Nevertheless, readers with memories of the lectures will find that differences outweigh similarities. Three of the lectures were fully scripted, three were improvised, on the basis of short notes and preselected music examples, and all contained an informal autobiographical element which it has not seemed appropriate to preserve in these pages. There was an inherent incitement to megalomania in my original title, 'The World of Twentieth-Century Music', quickly modified in practice to 'My World of Twentieth-Century Music'. That title, too, has been jettisoned, but it should soon become clear that the text is very personal – selective, narrow, limited – in the range of composers, commentators, materials and topics considered. While striving to resist presumptions of absolute authority, I cannot deny that my chosen materials are the result of value judgements preceding, and therefore influencing, analysis. Despite the use of a very general title, I have shunned the relative comprehensiveness of my earlier textbook, *Musical Composition in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1999). But I cannot claim to have radically transformed my identity since that earlier project, to the extent of changing all the instincts, interests, predispositions and prejudices which in the end determine matters of authorial style and content.

What I have attempted here is a discourse, or series of narratives, going deeper into certain aspects of twentieth-century composition than was possible in its more introductory predecessor. In essence, twentieth-century composition is seen as the result of a continuing, intensifying dialogue between modernism and classicism which began quite early in the nineteenth century, in the wake of the Enlightenment. Yet I do not propose a simple homology between compositional techniques and those social, cultural forces and events that can be seen as more or less direct reflections of developments in the history of ideas: for example, there is no presumption that late modernism maps tidily onto late capitalism. Matters

of cultural context are certainly not shunned: but they tend to facilitate the highlighting of the special qualities of artworks as objects for subjective reception, contemplation and aesthetic sustenance, rather than as functional commodities subject to the economic imperatives of the entertainment industry.

Although such aspects as place and nationality, and social or aesthetic beliefs and practices, are acknowledged and discussed, the book remains focused, first, on compositions as expressive structures and, second – this is especially the case with Chapter 5 – on various critical, musicological commentaries on those compositions. It is not a history of musical life in the twentieth century: in terms of Jim Samson's useful distinction, it is more about music as object and concept – as 'text' – than about music as event: always allowing for the fact that any discussion of the genre or style of a composition has the potential to mediate between the status of a musical work as 'object' and its status as 'event'. Moreover, although the discourse is consistently work-centred, the concept of the work it embodies is anything but monolithic, dehumanised or dehistoricised: the autonomy of the masterly musical composition and its ability to transcend the limitations of a specific time and place are never as absolute as might initially appear to be the case.

The contexts which feature in the following pages are therefore a reflection of what I term, early in Chapter 1, 'multivalent critical perspectives', which fan out from that elementary binary division between the possible meanings or interpretations of a composition and the methods or techniques which have helped to generate it. Other binary pairings follow, among them formalism and hermeneutics, modernism and classicism, innovation and conservation, sacred and secular, Dionysian and Apollonian. But all these pairs are viewed less as absolute opposites than as interacting, overlapping tendencies, more mobile than fixed. This mobility extends to the various chapter and section titles, many of which are, to a degree, interchangeable: in addition, several composers and commentators on music appear in more than one location, acknowledging the pervasiveness of their perceived significance or influence. Occasionally the main context is that of other compositions, and these need not belong to the twentieth century: this is particularly so in Chapter 8, where references to Mozart, Tchaikovsky and – most extensively – Wagner range round the central topic of the *Requiem* by Hans Werner Henze.

One primary result of this focus on composed texts is that the quoted music examples can usually only give a hint of the critical and technical perspectives under consideration. A search for the published materials listed in the captions to the music examples is, therefore, strongly recommended. In preparing the text for publication, I have taken the opportunity to include revisions of certain writings already published elsewhere (these materials are identified in the Notes and Bibliography). I am grateful to the Boydell Press, and the publishers of *The Musical Times* and *Music and Letters*, for permission to include these reworked materials.

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Contents

	<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> vii
	<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
1	The work in the world	1
	Western orientations	1
	Progressiveness and place	3
	City life	6
	Place, personality and Sibelius	8
	Environmental sensibilities	12
2	Reflections, reactions	15
	Debussy in the mirror	15
	Webern's tribute to perfection	21
	Form and content: Webern's Op. 27/iii	25
	Canonic resonances	30
3	Rites of renewal and remembrance	34
	Janáček's conventions	34
	Janáček in context	40
	Bartók and tradition	47
	Bartók in 1939	49
4	Transcending the secular	55
	From classical to neoclassical	55
	Dithyramb	62
	Here and now, there and then	65
5	Overlapping opposites: Schoenberg observed	73
	Character	73
	Models	75
	Meanings	80
	Music, religion, politics	84

vi	Contents	
6	The subject of Britten	89
	Fulfilment, frustration	89
	Masking Dionysus	96
	The constraints of genre	103
7	Engagement or alienation?	108
	Between politics and art	108
	Marxism and after: Kagel	113
	Beethoven and after: Tippett and Shostakovich	117
	Judging Schnittke	121
	Affirmation, irony	124
8	Rites of transformation	127
	Words about harmony	127
	Aspects of the Requiem: Mozart, Wagner, Henze	130
	Wagner, Britten, Henze	138
	The German labyrinth	142
9	Modernism, lyricism	145
	Shadow and symmetry	145
	Perspectives on Carter	150
	Angles on Birtwistle	157
10	Experiment and orthodoxy	167
	Minimalism, modernism, classicism	167
	The Dionysian clockwork	169
	Ways, means, materials	176
	Mechanical and spiritual	179
11	Modernism in retreat?	186
	What kind of century?	186
	Theory, science, semiotics	188
	Resonance in space	191
	Echoes of voice	197
	Songs of ambivalence and experience	199
	A final focus	204
	<i>Notes</i>	208
	<i>Bibliography</i>	223
	<i>Index</i>	233

1 The work in the world

Western orientations

'Cereal music for the weed-killers. Sally Beamish's new Proms piece calls for cleaner farming methods.' This was the punning headline to an article in *The Independent on Sunday* for 22 July 2001 about a BBC Proms commission called *Knotgrass Elegy*. A note in the 2001 Proms brochure elaborated: 'inspired by Graham Harvey's book *The Killing of the Countryside* and set in a latter-day Garden of Eden, the work describes the ravaging of our planet by pesticides and herbicides, with a particular focus on the fate of the humble knotweed grass... and the work describes a catalogue of destruction that results in the demise of both the knotgrass beetle and the partridge'.

While this pressingly contemporary, literally down-to-earth subject-matter was bound to affect the immediate response of audience and critics to *Knotgrass Elegy*, it is safe to predict that Beamish's composition is unlikely to have any great influence or effect on the environmental policies of the British government. It is not to be equated with a series of massive public demonstrations, or with a decisive electoral vote in favour of The Green Party. A composition like *Knotgrass Elegy* takes its place in the world as an art-work making political or other statements of belief. The beliefs in themselves are neither new nor unfamiliar; and in presenting them in the way they do, musical art-works in a modern, serious style demonstrate that their principal purpose is to be aesthetic within a particular cultural context.

Sally Beamish chose, in *Knotgrass Elegy*, to call for cleaner farming methods: yet her artistic and social value as a composer cannot be constrained by the relevance of her compositions to environmental or social topics, even if her musical style can somehow be shown to reflect a life-style consistently committed to 'green' principles. Just as, in the most familiar twentieth-century British examples, the fact that Michael Tippett, Benjamin Britten and several other important composers were homosexuals and pacifists creates a context for their compositions but cannot be said to provide all the useful materials for the critical, technical interpretation of those compositions, so the musical world of Sally Beamish is not determined entirely by her attitude to herbicides and pesticides.

To write in this way might appear to support the belief that 'postwar music scholarship has been particularly prone to the view that an analysis of social and political processes is irrelevant to an understanding of culture', and that while

much music scholarship has sought to avoid out-and-out formalism by addressing music's various 'contexts'...the very treatment of these contexts as explanatory factors in understanding musical texts can reinforce the tendency to privilege the text itself. What is lost here is any sense of the dialectical relationship between acts of musical communication on the one hand and political, economic, and cultural power-relations on the other.¹

There can be few musicologists writing about and reading around the subject today who will not be sensitive to the problems and challenges which arise with the concept of the composition, the work, as a text – an object open to infinite interpretation and reinterpretation. Yet to ask 'musical scholarship' – as Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh do – to transform itself into a form of cultural history rooted in unease with 'a cultural system than conceals domination and inequality' (p. 21) is to ask a great deal, given 'the multitextuality of music as culture and the irreducible complexity of musical signification' (p. 37).

It is therefore useful to be reminded of the difference between modes of critical and technical interpretation rooted in beliefs about the quality and value of those musical manifestations commonly termed 'compositions', and those more contextual enterprises to which such discriminations are anathema. For example, Peter J. Martin is clear that a proper sociology of music avoids aesthetic judgements, remaining 'indifferent to the arguments of musicians, critics and so on in their various debates and disputes',² and while it is not inconceivable for musicology to do the same – depending on the aims and ambitions of particular projects – the present enquiry is not of that kind. But my enquiry does acknowledge what Born and Hesmondhalgh term the 'irreducible complexity of musical signification'. There is no attempt to exclude a formalist stratum from its multivalent critical perspectives, if only because this can act as a check on the temptation to constrain the beliefs and predispositions of composers, in the same way as the aims and requirements of the musical institutions which provide composers with social roles are constrained. For myself, now, I do not accept that privileging the 'text', to the extent of commenting – subjectively – in detail on an object which I can see and contemplate in print as well as hear in real time, inevitably leads to an interpretation that lacks all social, political, cultural content.

The following chapters will be much concerned with the argument that musical compositions exist in, and in some ways reflect, the wider world of politics, society, culture: that even if the nature of musical compositions (as describable in texts like this one) is primarily determined by the relationship between the creating mind of the composer and the interpreting minds of performers and listeners, those minds do not exist in a vacuum. To explore composers and their works from within cultural contexts held to interact significantly with the character and content of those works continues a well-established critical tradition, the composition

of twentieth-century music having taken place in constant counterpoint with commentaries on composers and compositions, many by musicologists eager to impose a sense of order, a construction of discipline, on what were often seen by contemporaries as the most chaotic and subversive compositional initiatives. We can trace in many of these writings the assumption that the kind of creativity most relevant to the last century reflected cultural realities as vividly as it resisted absorption into mere parallelism with social, political or military events. From the tension between reflection and resistance comes that sense of discontent commonly aligned with modernism as a form of cultural practice, even if that practice has more to do with alienation from a culture's predominant elements than with acceptance of them. And it should follow, logically, that modernism as discontent should be traceable to another binary tension – between the composer's sense of place (the need for the comforts of home, stability, tradition) and that same composer's resistance to the kind of constraints that are likely to be present in any modern, developed society founded in the uneasy interaction of conservative and radical impulses, and with strong popular preferences for 'escapist' entertainment, short-term gratification, rather than the challenges and deferred rewards of 'high' art.

Progressiveness and place

The argument that the early twentieth-century Viennese environment stimulated Schoenberg and Webern to pursue their radical visions, just as the contemporaneous Parisian environment stimulated Debussy and Stravinsky, says little more than that the larger cities were most likely to offer that institutional variety necessary to ensure an occasional hearing for radical or exotic musics, alongside more mainstream materials. That is not to suggest that composers were driven into radical modernity by cities, or that they were somehow obliged to compose the city into their music. Yet the feeling persists that the kind of opposition found, especially in Mahler and Ives, between the stresses and strains of professional life in the city before 1914 and the escape into the country for idyllic periods of composition was not typical of composers belonging more decisively to the twentieth century than to the nineteenth. Indeed, these composers might have gained strength from being implicated in such explicit interactions between city and nature as Julian Johnson has proposed in writing about early twentieth-century Vienna:

It is one of Vienna's most remarkable contradictions that it was a city increasingly financed by industrial wealth and yet one which managed largely to disguise the origin of that wealth. It epitomised the bourgeois fantasy of an autonomous culture which denied its economic foundations in industry and the market place. While denying that its cultural life was founded on the domination of nature, it sought to redress that by importing nature into itself.³

There is an important distinction to be drawn between the bourgeois 'desire to mask the modernity of their economic life with the archaisms of their aesthetic style' (p. 18) and the ability of a composer like Webern to fulfil the modernist project by means of what Johnson terms 'the transformation of nature'. Webern did this by developing the Mahlerian precept of nature 'not as the "expressive content" of his music but as a formal model, the paradigm of a technical process' (p. 42). It has long been known that Webern's susceptibility to landscape – to mountains, in particular – was associated by him with music that shuns the directly pictorial programmaticism of Strauss's *Eine Alpensinfonie* (1911–15). Yet there is something in the spirit of Webern's music which is equivalent to the character of a location, and the feelings that location inspired in him. Johnson links this 'something' directly to the contrast between country and city:

It seems reasonable to suggest [that the song, 'Nachtgebet der Braut' (1903),] was a product of his new life in Vienna to the same extent that the majority of the early songs are hymns to the beauties of the landscape surrounding the Preglhof. The majority of these are concerned with landscape as a metaphor of peace and spaciousness. Yet the first song he wrote after moving to Vienna is fast-moving, passionate, anxious, and full of a new, highly erotic longing not evidenced in many of the other songs. (pp. 56–7)

Similarly, Johnson observes that 'modern communications – such as those of a modern metropolis like Vienna or Berlin criss-crossed by transport systems in a world of constant movement which tended to dissolve the sense of solid objects and places – produced the paradox of individually purposive lines accumulating to such an extent that the result, to the bystander, verged on chaos'. Johnson then claims that 'this can be heard quite literally in Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony [No. 1] of 1906', in which 'contrapuntal activity – the combination of subjectively purposive lines – here becomes so dense and so rapid that it risks becoming opaque' (p. 18).

As Johnson notes, significant moments of change and progress in the work of composers can often be illuminatingly associated with conjunctions between location and subject-matter, life and work. In the case of Stravinsky, Richard Taruskin's assertion that *Petrushka* was the work in which 'Stravinsky at last became Stravinsky'⁴ can be developed to suggest that *Petrushka* was the first work in which Stravinsky achieved the distance and detachment necessary to embody the specifically national in a potently modernist way. Most notably, its ending provides a paradigm of modernism's concern with disorientation and discontinuity: there is the terror of the Showman at the sudden, unexpected appearance of that most unnatural feature, the ghost of a puppet. And the music responds with superimpositions and juxtapositions that focus intently on the tension between octatonic symmetry and diatonic hierarchy which was one of Stravinsky's

best-learned lessons from his Russian precursors.⁵ This music evokes a continuing national tradition, and at the same time makes itself acceptable and attractive to radical spirits within a broader Western culture. In 1910, and after, Stravinsky's up-to-date Russian exoticism had a special appeal to the kind of French sensibility that found a sympathetic resonance between the 'otherness' of the octatonic scale (and other modes of limited transposition) and those poetic and pictorial concerns of the French progressives located primarily in Paris. Stravinsky might not have felt encouraged to develop his radical streak so fully and so rapidly had he been writing entirely for and within Russia in the years immediately after *Petrushka*.

So far I have touched on some of the ways in which early twentieth-century music can be perceived in terms of a conjunction between a composer's personal response to place (as nationality and location) and varieties of disorientation and instability as technical characteristics of musical modernism. Another example of this conjunction emerges from Judit Frigyesi's analysis of the conflicting reactions to Bartók's early work – the contrast between the 'hostility and unfair criticism' he received from 'the official cultural establishment in Hungary' and the 'enthusiastic, almost fanatically devoted and supportive audience... that surrounded him in Budapest'.⁶ Escaping from city to country, Frigyesi argues, 'gave Bartók the feeling of being one with all – with nature and society – and at the same time above and distanced from everything' (p. 153): and this polarity linked on to a technical practice aiming to express 'the greatest polarisation and underlying unity of the material' (p. 194). This was a practice in which 'unity' meant 'the capacity to make transparent the presence of the inner governing force that unites all elements in spite of their fragmentary nature, even opposition' (p. 297). It was a practice directly relevant to Bartók's later 'classicising' tendency (discussed in Chapter 3), and to his concern to distance himself from fully fledged modernism, even when he was in unhappy exile from Hungary after 1939.

'Genius' can be defined as the ability to develop the most visionary responses to wherever geniuses find themselves: and this supports Julian Johnson's ideas about the link between the hectic polyphony of Schoenberg's First Chamber Symphony and the topography of Vienna and Berlin. There is an obvious but profound process of interaction between the attractions which the physical qualities of locations can exert on strongly creative personalities, and the degree to which the cultural significance of a location is determined by the personality choosing it as somewhere to live and work. It would nevertheless be futile to claim that – for example – Debussy (to be discussed in Chapter 2) did more to imbue France in general and Paris in particular with distinctive musical attributes, than France, and Paris, did to mould Debussy's musical personality. Both sides of the equation are vital, and one side is meaningless without the other. Hence the importance of nationality (as distinct from nationalism) as a factor in culture, and the importance of

degrees of pictorialism in twentieth-century composition, contributing to musical identity and character.

City life

Few compositions are likely to have been more directly affected by non-musical events occurring some years after their composition than Steve Reich's *City Life* (1995) for eighteen musicians, including pre-recorded sounds played on two sampling keyboards. Reich writes that 'the desire to include everyday sounds in music has been growing', and gives as examples 'the use of taxi horns in Gershwin's *An American in Paris*... Varèse's sirens, Antheil's airplane propeller' and 'Cage's radio'. With twentieth-century advances in technology, the sampling keyboard now makes such usages 'a practical reality. In *City Life* not only samples of speech but also car horns, door slams, air brakes, subway chimes, pile drivers, car alarms, heart-beats, boat horns, buoys, and fire and police sirens are part of the fabric of the piece.'⁷

Including everyday, predominantly urban sounds in a composition alongside conventional instruments or voices is an obvious way of introducing a documentary, illustrative element into a work. It has long been possible to evoke the everyday by creating a collage of real-life sounds, 'composition' being the process of manipulating materials through editing. Such documentary compilations are the closest music comes to photography, in that the specifics of what is being depicted and evoked are relatively precise and unambiguous. The relationship between work and world is therefore direct, even if the possibility of determining some associated narrative as the collage unfolds in time may still be left to the listener's imagination. The association with musical sounds and structures usually ensures that the work/world relation is less precise. For example, in the fourth of *City Life*'s five movements, called 'Heartbeats/boats and buoys', the musical atmosphere evokes familiar kinds of water music, or riverscapes: but the connection with any particular city can only be arrived at through knowing the work's title, and hearing the movement in the context of other movements which are much more specific in their recreation of a New York environment. Moreover, even the last movement, called 'Heavy smoke', which uses speech samples 'from actual field communications of the New York City Fire Department on February 26, 1993, the day the World Trade Center was bombed', is not so much a documentary recreation – a 'picture in sound' – of the immediate aftermath of that event, as a musical structure which is associated by the composer with that event in that place. After 11 September 2001, it is instructive to reflect on why it will probably prove impossible to treat recordings made on that day as the basis for an art-work, and *City Life* itself will inevitably be affected by these retrospective associations. Yet it remains true – if we can set these associations aside – that of Reich's chosen materials and their treatments, forming something quite close to a kind of chorale prelude,

only the speech samples are exclusively and entirely associated with city life. The harmonies, rhythms and tone colours devised by Reich could serve equally well to evoke many quite different situations, locations and states of mind. And if location and situation disappear, a mood of non-place-specific agitation and menace is still likely to survive.

While works like *City Life* are written for live concert performance, or domestic reproduction by way of compact disc, they can still be said to have a function, though not qualifying as functional music like folk dances, wedding marches or national anthems. Their function is to refute any assumption that concert music has no significant connection to the cultural, social world within which the concert in question takes place. Nevertheless, to assert with every sign of confidence that 'musical autonomy... is a chimera: neither music nor anything else can be other than worldly through and through'⁸ simply draws attention to the problems inherent in trying to show exactly in what the 'worldliness' of musical works consists. There is, for example, a great difference between the directness of the associations of a music hall song and other 'found' materials with which Charles Ives evokes late nineteenth-century New York in his orchestral piece *Central Park in the Dark* (1906) and the far more allusive network of connections between Brooklyn Bridge, Hart Crane's poem 'The Bridge', and Elliott Carter's *A Symphony of Three Orchestras* (1976). David Schiff describes this as 'a symphonic work whose sounds, textures and form would evoke Crane's life and work in purely abstract terms'.⁹ At one extreme, the association is essential – Carter's *Symphony* would not be as it is, we infer, without Crane and his poem. At the other extreme, Crane's (and New York's) specifics have been transformed into 'purely abstract' musical terms, so that even when certain pictorial associations can be proposed – Crane's flight of the seagull, Carter's volatile opening trumpet solo – the assumption is that knowledge of such an association is not only unnecessary to understanding the music; it might even impose an inappropriately literal and restrictive level of connection between source and product. Neither the real Brooklyn Bridge nor Hart Crane's poetic evocation of the bridge is more than a pretext for a composition whose importance to the world represented by the institutions and individuals who value Carter's music must be determined primarily in terms of that composition's quality and status as a musical work of art. This formulation reinforces the aesthetic, evaluative processes at work in my text, and distinguishes its hermeneutics – its assessment of the relations between work and world – from those to be found in sociologies of music.

In its use of distinct, interacting instrumental groupings, *A Symphony of Three Orchestras* does not sound all that different from Carter's earlier *Concerto For Orchestra* (1969), inspired by a poem by St John Perse which 'describes winds blowing over the American plains destroying old, dried-up forms and sweeping in the new' (Schiff, *Carter*, p. 291). David Schiff accepts that listeners to the