

**DONALD  
MITCHELL**

**The  
Language  
of  
MODERN  
MUSIC**

Modern Music

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# The Language of Modern Music

Donald Mitchell

Donald Mitchell's pioneering study of the ideas and creative forces that went to the shaping of the language of twentieth-century music has become a classic text. It has been many times reprinted, and continues to generate discussion and controversy among fresh generations of musicians, students and music lovers, often from different countries or from different musical cultures. The most recent translation of the book makes it available to Japanese readers. This reprint includes for the first time a final chapter, *Music or 'Music'?*, which previously has appeared in book form only in the American edition.

The argument is firmly based on consideration of the twin giants of the first half of the century, Schoenberg and Stravinsky, and explores the aesthetic premises which underpin their music. Surrounding that exploration are the author's now celebrated forays into the related arts, painting and architecture above all. The parallels he suggests were thought to be novel in 1963. After more than a decade, they begin to read like prophecy.

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**THE LANGUAGE  
OF MODERN MUSIC**



DONALD MITCHELL

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*The Language  
of Modern Music*

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**TO PETER & MOLLIE DU SAUTOY**





**The artist cannot start from scratch  
but he can criticize his forerunners.**

**E. H. GOMBRICH**



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## NOTE TO REVISED EDITION

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Two quotations shall serve in place of a Preface, both of them, I think, relevant to this book. The first is from E. H. Carr's *What is History?* (Pelican Books, 1964, pp. 35-6):

We sometimes speak of the course of history as a 'moving procession'. The metaphor is fair enough, provided it does not tempt the historian to think of himself as an eagle surveying the scene from a lonely crag or as a V.I.P. at the saluting base. Nothing of the kind! The historian is just another dim figure trudging along in another part of the procession. And as the procession winds along, swerving now to the right and now to the left, and sometimes doubling back on itself, the relative positions of different parts of the procession are constantly changing. . . . New vistas, new angles of vision, constantly appear as the procession—and the historian with it—moves along. The historian is part of history. The point in the procession at which he finds himself determines his angle of vision over the past.

The second comes from the American critic Harold Rosenberg's *The Tradition of the New* (London, 1962, p. 23):

What makes any definition of a movement in art dubious is that it never fits the deepest artists in the movement—certainly not as well as, if successful, it does the others. Yet without the definition something essential in those best is bound to be missed. The attempt to define is like a game in which you cannot possibly reach the goal from the starting point but can only close in on it by picking up each time from where the last play landed.

Mr. Rosenberg makes a shrewd point. Nonetheless, nothing that has been written about the first edition of this book makes me regret my attempt to play the game. I have taken the opportunity that this third edition affords to add a new chapter, 'Music or "Music"?', which first appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement* (issue of January 4th, 1968).

London, 1969

D.M.

# I

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## SCHOENBERG: THE PRINCIPLE CAPABLE OF SERVING AS A RULE

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I think one may claim that one of the main tasks that faced the creators of the New Music was *reintegration*. Perhaps it might be expressed thus, this seeking after new means of composing, of putting together:

to obtain the status of a rule; to uncover the principle capable of serving as a rule.

Those words are not mine. They are not even the words of a musician. They comprise, in fact, the definition of 'standardization' by the architect Le Corbusier,<sup>1</sup> a figure in modern culture of the greatest importance, not only for what he has done, for what he has built, but for what, as a creator, he stood and stands. He may be compared, not vaguely, but in close detail, with Schoenberg, with whose career and personality Le Corbusier shares an astonishing amount of common ground. (An ironic parallel resides in the sharp resistances each of these remarkable men has aroused, with the result that some of Le Corbusier's most significant and influential buildings have never risen beyond the drawing-board, while much of the music of the most influential composer of the twentieth century was for years scarcely heard in the concert hall.) Le Corbusier,

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<sup>1</sup> Le Corbusier: *The Modulor*, London, 1954, p. 109.

## *Modulor and Method*

out of the experience of his practice as an artist—I use the word advisedly: our ignorance of the *art* of architecture is shameful—evolved his Modulor: ‘A Harmonious Measure to the Human Scale Universally applicable to Architecture and Mechanics’. Schoenberg, likewise, out of the practical business of composing, evolved his ‘Method of Composing with Twelve Tones Which Are Related Only with One Another’.<sup>1</sup> It is amusing to compare the reception of Le Corbusier’s Modulor with the reception of Schoenberg’s Method. Amusing, not because the world of architecture offers a salutary contrast to that of music, but because the resistances to, the criticisms of, the Modulor—of course, one has to take into account the impact of the whole man, the total personality, just as one must with Schoenberg—are couched in the very same terms, the very language, in which the latter’s Method was assaulted. We find, moreover, Le Corbusier fighting on those two fronts with which students of Schoenberg’s art are so richly familiar (incidentally, Schoenberg himself tells us that he was called an architect, not to flatter him, but to deny his serial music spontaneity);<sup>2</sup> on the one hand Le Corbusier has had to insist that ‘Science, method . . . the ART of doing things: never has it shackled talent or imprisoned the muse’, on the other, to defend the Modulor from some of its indiscriminating disciples:

I have devoted watchful attention to the use of the ‘Modulor’, and to the supervision of its use. Sometimes I have seen on the drawing-boards designs that were displeasing, badly put together: ‘But it was done with the “Modulor”’. —‘Well then, forget about the “Modulor”’. Do you imagine that the “Modulor” is a panacea for clumsiness or carelessness? Scrap it. If all you can do with the “Modulor” is to produce such horrors as these, drop it. Your eyes are your judges, the only ones you should know. Judge with your eyes, gentlemen. Let us repeat together, in simple good faith, that the “Modulor” is a working tool, a precision instrument; a keyboard shall we say, a piano, a *tuned* piano. The piano has been tuned: it is up to you to play it well. The

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold Schoenberg: *Style and Ideas*, London, 1951, p. 107.

<sup>2</sup> Schoenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

## *New Formal Principles*

"Modulor" does not confer talent, still less genius. It does not make the dull subtle: it only offers them the facility of a sure measure. But out of the unlimited choice of combinations of the "Modulor", the choice is yours.<sup>1</sup>

Substitute 'ears' for 'eyes', 'Method' for 'Modulor', and that brilliant passage might well have been written by the musician, not by the architect. Consider these passages from Schoenberg:

The introduction of my method of composing with twelve tones does not facilitate composing; on the contrary, it makes it more difficult. Modernistically-minded beginners often think they should try it before having acquired the necessary technical equipment. This is a great mistake. The restrictions imposed on a composer by the obligation to use only one set in a composition are so severe that they can only be overcome by an imagination which has survived a tremendous number of adventures. Nothing is given by this method; but much is taken away.

The possibilities of evolving the formal elements of music—melodies, themes, phrases, motives, figures, and chords—out of a basic set are unlimited.

One has to follow the basic set; but, nevertheless, one composes as freely as before.<sup>2</sup>

It would hardly be necessary to recite these well-known quotations were it not for a still-widespread belief that Schoenberg's Method magically substituted an unnatural and arbitrary set of rules for what was, hitherto, the unimpeded 'inspiration' of the composer, rules which either excluded inspiration (so chained and enslaved becomes the Muse!) or made inspiration simply superfluous, i.e., the Method was a convenient recipe for composition, rather like cooking: Take a Basic Set, warm it gently until it gains shape, invert it, etc., etc.

Perhaps it was inevitable that the Method itself should become the centre of attraction. This danger was seen at the outset, when Schoenberg's 'new formal principles', in

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<sup>1</sup> Le Corbusier, *op. cit.*, p. 81, pp. 130-1.

<sup>2</sup> Schoenberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 114, 116-17.

## *New Formal Principles*

an essay of that title by Erwin Stein, were first set down in print—a most important paper, first published in 1924, at a time when the Method had only just reached its final stage, had just, that is, been composed (composed, *not* abstractly constructed outside musical experience).<sup>1</sup> Stein writes:

No doubt the chief objection to the new formal principles will be: 'Why, all this is constructed!' And so it is—not theoretically, however, but practically, not in terms of intellectual concepts but of notes. Let us see a work of man which is not constructed! Or is it seriously suggested that fugue or sonata have grown like the lilies of the field? That the Ninth 'struck' Beethoven, just as a bad joke occurs to a journalist? Why don't you have a look at his sketch-books? The constructor of genius invents.

And elsewhere he observes:

The depth and originality of Beethoven's musical ideas cannot be adequately described by such words as 'intuition' or 'inspiration'. Beethoven *worked*—not only with his heart, but also with his brain. Why, indeed, should thinking necessarily stupefy?<sup>2</sup>

But despite this very lucidly expressed warning, Schoenberg's Method was talked about, thought about, fought about, as if it were altogether a matter of theory. That it was deduced from his practice as a composer, then demonstrated in his serial compositions, that time and time again he begged for judgment of his work (and that of his pupils) based not upon appraisal of the Method but upon evaluation of the music as music, these facts were lost in a fog of mostly misinformed criticism. Worse still, Schoenberg's music, between the first and second world wars, made the most infrequent appearances in the concert hall, a neglect that was, of course, intensified by the ban on his music imposed by the Nazis. This quite extra-

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<sup>1</sup> 'Although he constantly examined and codified his methods, he did not begin with a technique; he ended with one.' What Bruce Killeen writes of Hopkins, the poet, in 'Façade' (the *Guardian*, July 12th, 1962), is strictly applicable to Schoenberg.

<sup>2</sup> Erwin Stein: *Orpheus in New Guises*, London, 1953, pp. 76, 91.



## Music, not Mathematics

ordinary and exceptional state of affairs was in no way accompanied by a diminished controversy in respect of the Method. On the contrary, we had the curious situation in which the works of certainly the most influential composer of the twentieth century were hardly to be heard, while the Method—which had first been born of the music and afterwards rationalized and adopted as a creative principle in work after work—was as hotly disputed as if the music had, in fact, been ever present in hostile ears. It was not long, indeed, before the merits of serial technique were pronounced upon by those who had had no contact with Schoenberg's music whatsoever; an oddly unreal, artificial and basically unhealthy condition which had tragic consequences for Schoenberg's personality, if not for his art. How conscious he was of the unmusical spirit in which his music was often approached could not be better illustrated than by this letter, written in his own English, which belongs to 1938:

Now one word about your intention to analyse these pieces as regards to the use of the basic set of twelve tones. I have to tell you frankly: I could not do this. It would mean that I myself had to work days to find out, how the twelve tones have been used and there are enough places where it will be almost impossible to find the solution. I myself consider this question as unimportant and have always told my pupils the same. I can show you a great number of examples, which explain the *idea* of this manner of composition, but instead of the merely mechanical application I can inform you about the compositional and esthetic advantage of it. You will accordingly realize why I call it a 'method' and why I consider the term 'system' as incorrect. Of course, you will then understand the technic [*sic*] by which this method is applied. I will give you a general aspect of the possibilities of the application and illustrate as much as possible by examples. And I expect you will acknowledge, that these works are principally works of musical imagination and not, as many suppose, mathematical constructions.<sup>1</sup>

One doubts whether the kind of attitude of which

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<sup>1</sup> Josef Rufer: *The Works of Arnold Schoenberg*, trans. Dika Newlin, London 1962, p. 141. Letter to Arthur W. Locke, May 25th, 1938.