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BJ&Ouml;RN HEILE

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# Darmstadt as Other: British and American Responses to Musical Modernism

BJÖRN HEILE

## Abstract

There is currently a backlash against modernism in English-language music studies. While this vogue of ‘modernism bashing’ is ostensibly based on progressive ideologies, it is dependent on a one-sided perception of musical modernism which it shares with earlier conservative disparagements. Of central importance in this respect is the ‘othering’ of musical modernism as an essentially continental European phenomenon in the ‘Anglosphere’, where it is consistently suspected of being a ‘foreign import’ – by conservative commentators in the first part of the twentieth century, just as by their ‘new-musicological’ successors at the turn of the twenty-first.

The example of the Anglo-American reception of the so-called Darmstadt school, usually regarded as quintessentially modernist, demonstrates how certain partial understandings and downright prejudices are handed down. For instance, the critical commonplace of Darmstadt’s presumed obsession with such values as technical innovation, structural coherence, and a scientific rationalization of composition says more about those who coined it – mostly American critics who were uncomfortable with the aesthetic as well as the political radicalism of Darmstadt – than about the music itself. It is often precisely this depoliticized, sanitized construction of modernism that present-day critics have attacked, apparently unaware that this has always been a misrepresentation. By thus tracing some common misapprehensions in the Anglo-American reception of musical modernism, I want to argue for a fuller recognition of modernism’s essentially dialectical nature.

There is currently a backlash against modernist music and its aesthetic within certain areas of anglophone musicology. I use the term ‘anglophone’ here, not with the usual intention as a cautious disclaimer, meaning roughly ‘everything I know of’, but to highlight that this backlash is a peculiarity of American and British musicology (leaving aside other English-speaking countries for the moment). While the critique of modernism plays an important, and indeed necessary, role in the critical discourses of many countries (e.g. France, Germany, Italy), the anti-modernist onslaught we are witnessing is largely confined to Britain and the US. Part of this article is therefore concerned with analysing the differences between Anglo-American and Continental receptions of modernism, thereby also deliberately inverting the largely unconscious but pervasive assumption that anglophone accounts are normative whereas others are deviations that primarily reflect their particular cultural background.

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This article is an updated and extended version of a position paper given at the Critical Musicology Forum ‘Critical Musicology and High Modernism’, University of Nottingham, 21 January 2002. I am indebted to Christopher Fox for many suggestions received in the earliest stages of this project. His article ‘Darmstadt and the Modernist Myth’ also proved seminal. I am also grateful to John Croft and Tom Service, as well as to Christopher Mark and David Clarke of *tcm* for their valuable comments on draft versions of this article.

In the current climate musical modernism is habitually described as being obsessed with technical innovation, structural coherence, and a scientific rationalization of composition, thus shutting itself off hermetically from any kind of outside influence, be it historical, cultural, or social. Such an emphasis on an aesthetic of autonomy, purportedly foundational for modernism, is something of a *bête noire*, particularly for the ‘new musicology’ – whence, accordingly, the main attack on modernism is coming. (Although the label ‘new musicology’ is applied to a considerable diversity of individuals and positions, its proponents appear to find common ground in the critique of the ideology of autonomy – hence the enmity towards modernism felt by many, if by no means all, of them.) If I take issue with the new-musicological critique of modernism, it is not because I disagree with its challenge to autonomy, but precisely because I sympathize with many of its aims. However, I suspect that such opponents of modernism are barking up the wrong tree. The question needs to be raised as to whether they are not reacting against a particular historiographic and critical construction of modernism, predicated on the idea of autonomy, rather than against the music itself. (It is for these reasons that I find the new-musicological critique of modernism more worthy of a response than the conservative perspective according to which atonality or serialism is ‘unnatural’.<sup>1</sup>) In the following I will first discuss the currently dominant new-musicological critique of modernism, and then, crucially, put this into context by relating it to earlier but still influential accounts from traditions of American and British experimentalism, as well as of British cultural conservatism. How far historical connections can be drawn between these different positions is open to debate, but the similarity between some of the arguments charted here is certainly conspicuous.

### The New-Musicological Critique of Modernism . . .

Two articles, Susan McClary’s ‘Terminal Prestige: the Case of Avant-garde Music Composition’ and Rose Rosengard Subotnik’s ‘The Challenge of Contemporary Music’, can be taken as representative of the new-musicological critique of modernism, for their main arguments are repeated, largely unreflected, elsewhere (some examples will follow).<sup>2</sup> Their picture of musical modernism is roughly the one I have sketched above;<sup>3</sup> and their basic rhetorical operation is apparent throughout: extreme generalization and reduction. McClary’s hard-hitting article is evidently deliberately confrontational in order to ‘stir things up’ (a strategy for which I have some sympathy, as this essay demonstrates). Her critique hinges mostly on a reading of some of Babbitt’s writings, and also throws in quotations from Schoenberg and Boulez that do no justice to the complexity of either composer’s thought (for instance, the

1 For updated versions of familiar conservative arguments see, for instance, Lerdahl, *Tonal Pitch Space*, and Taruskin, ‘Does Nature Call the Tune?’.

2 Further mentions of these authors refer to the same publications, unless stated otherwise. Page numbers are given in the text.

3 Except that neither uses the term ‘modernism’ in her title. However, Subotnik mentions in a footnote that her ‘contemporary’ can be replaced by ‘modern’ (353, n. 1), and McClary similarly replaces ‘modernism’ for her earlier ‘avant-garde’ in her ‘Response to Linda Dusman’, in which she replies to a critique of her ‘Terminal Prestige’ in Dusman, ‘Unheard-of’. Without wanting to engage in a philological discussion of these terms, I have chosen the term ‘modernism’, as it seems a more general, and more generally accepted, description of the aesthetic values discussed.

portrayal of Boulez, who with his 'Domaine musical' concert seasons did more than anyone to bring new music 'to the general public', is unbalanced). Quotations of Babbitt are then presented as representative of 'the avant-garde composer', a term that is repeated over and over, as in the following passage:

the avant-garde composer requires a discursive community for support every bit as much as does any musician, but the constitution of this community and its values are those of the ivory tower. Babbitt, for instance, writes: . . . (62)

While this use of 'for instance' already stretches conventional semantics, Babbitt is some pages further down multiplied to form 'this group of artists in universities' (66), even though no other example has been mentioned; and on the very next page he becomes 'the avant-garde':

Ironically, the 'avant-garde' no longer identifies with the new: institutionalized in the universities, it has become the conservative stronghold of the current music scene, for it holds stringently to difficulty and inaccessibility as the principal signs of its integrity and moral superiority. (67)

This identification of Babbitt with the avant garde *per se* is all the more problematic given that he is widely seen as an extreme case and has been criticized *within* what can only be regarded as 'the avant garde': certainly European composers have – arguably unjustly – treated him with indifference or even contempt. McClary is even unfazed by her own – very honest – admission that Babbitt's music does not conform to the aesthetic principles she finds in his writings.<sup>4</sup> What, then, is she arguing against, if not a particular view of modernism, or at most, a tendency within modernism? Why does she feel the need to address her critique to 'avant-garde music' or 'the avant-garde composer', instead of simply to Babbitt?

A similar generalizing tendency can be observed in Subotnik, but whereas McClary is primarily concerned with a particular tradition within modernism, Subotnik aims for what she regards as modernism's central pillar – an arguably more problematic position. She attaches her critique to the single figure of Arnold Schoenberg, who is held out as representative of 'contemporary music' as a whole. Subotnik is noticeably uneasy about this conceit herself, as the following quotation reveals:

Over the course of the century, to be sure, contemporary music has developed not as a monolithic but as a quintessentially pluralistic enterprise, with a diversity of schools and interests that allow many sorts of interpretation. Nevertheless, a strong argument can be made that the contemporary musical aesthetic was shaped above all by the ideas of the most strikingly unpopular of its early important figures, Arnold Schoenberg. (272)

While I couldn't agree more with the first sentence, this is decidedly not what Subotnik's article is about. As for the second sentence, note the phrase 'a strong argument can be made'.

<sup>4</sup> This point is also raised in Dusman, 'Unheard-of', 135.

I am not sure whether such an argument *can* be made – most students of new music would probably raise their eyebrows – but certainly Subotnik doesn't advance one: she simply asserts. Furthermore, if contemporary music is 'quintessentially pluralistic', how can 'the contemporary musical aesthetic' in the singular exist at all? Only if you decide *ex cathedra* that one position is dominant. This is exactly what Subotnik does: 'but even including such schools [electronic music, multimedia efforts, tonal revisionism, and various forms of popular art music], the majority of current composers still work as heirs to the ideals and contradictions of Schoenberg's norm of radical autonomy in the sense of preparing painstakingly constructed pieces for presentation at traditional occasions as potential masterpieces' (276). (Note the term 'majority': who is counting, and what sort of argument is this?) While the reduction of contemporary music to the aesthetics of *one* composer, who formulated his views in a very particular social and cultural climate, is more than questionable, Subotnik doesn't do justice even to him. She hardly ever quotes Schoenberg directly, and never extensively; she basically attributes views to him without taking the complex dialectics of his thought into account (even though she has herself noted the 'contradictions' in his thought, as in the quotation above). Accordingly, her image of Schoenberg contrasts sharply with such pieces as *Kol nidre* (1938), *Ode to Napoleon* (1945), and *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947).

Small wonder, then, that Subotnik manages to paint contemporary music in the darkest colours; this construct of 'contemporary music' is almost entirely of her own making. Nevertheless, what is thus construed still seems a lot more appealing than the alternative she envisages. Her stern admonition to composers to substitute their 'rugged individualism [for] the cooperative, humane vision of "We are the World"' (289) is not only philistine but also politically suspect. Contrary to Subotnik's assertions, few composers would dispute the value of 'moral reflection' in music (292); but her version of it smacks of heavy-handed moralism, and her 'ideal of community' (289) suggests collectivist coercion. Is it more than a coincidence that her repeated warnings against individualism (which, confusingly, she seems to equate with the ideal of 'structural integrity' – terms better construed as opposing principles within a dialectic) sound suspiciously similar to the first demand in Zhdanov's Stalinist *Manifesto for the Second International Congress of Composers and Music Critics* (1948), which, in the name of socialist realism, called upon composers to 'dispense with extreme subjective tendencies in their music and instead embrace the higher progressive ideals of the popular masses?'<sup>5</sup>

5 Quoted from Carroll, 'Commitment or Abrogation?', 592. Incidentally, I don't quite follow Subotnik's opposition between individualism and communication either: the argument could just as well be reversed by suggesting that only individual expression can be intersubjectively meaningful. In many, if not most, forms of Western popular music, such as blues, jazz, r'n'b, soul, rock, heavy metal, rap, and hip-hop, individual expression is similarly regarded as guaranteeing 'authenticity', which, through empathy and identification, is a prerequisite for meaningfulness. To give just one example, listening to Billie Holiday singing 'Strange Fruit' is a powerful experience precisely because we feel that it means a lot to her as an *individual*. I don't think that the terror in much of Xenakis' music or the sensuousness in Boulez's is fundamentally different (except perhaps for the subject position to which we ascribe the expression).

The attempt to reduce modernism to a small set of aesthetic principles has been continued elsewhere. For instance, in his 'Ghost Stories: Cultural Memory, Mourning, and the Myth of Originality', Lawrence Kramer revives the old cliché that modernist music is deliberately difficult, stating (with respect to Schoenberg) that 'to be "absolutely modern" one must be difficult, off-putting, esoteric and thus incorruptible in one's resistance to the blandishments and debasements of modern life' (269), going on to remark that the twentieth century had identified 'musical originality with technical innovation' (277), and concluding with the doom-mongering of the true conservative that 'it may well be true that high modernism was the death knell of classical music' (271).<sup>6</sup> Kramer does not find it necessary to inform his readers what high modernism is and what music or which composers can be thus identified (this particular passage does not seem to refer to Schoenberg). Instead, he is simply relying on the same readily available, stereotypical image that appears in (but probably does not originate from) McClary and Subotnik.

### ... and Its Basis in a Sanitized Apologia for Modernism

What seems worthy of critique is not only the sweeping generalizations these authors employ to arrive at their conclusions, but also the fact that this approach disregards the very nature of modernism. If there is any single value central to modernism, I would claim it is its dialectical nature: for virtually every position modernism has adopted, it has also formulated a critique. Thus, the 'quintessentially pluralistic enterprise' Subotnik describes, and not any one position taken by its proponents, is what lies at the core of modernism. The operation McClary, Subotnik, and Kramer undertake for their critiques of modernism rests on privileging some traditions or individuals over others. This is explicit in Subotnik's assertion of the dominance of (a very narrow interpretation of) Schoenberg's aesthetics in the face of a confusing variety of competing positions, and implicit in McClary's attempt to present some of Babbitt's writings as representative of 'the avant-garde' as a whole; Kramer's 'high modernism' is even less specific. Thus, they are effectively reinforcing a canon of modernist music that would need to be questioned. While recent critics, particularly within the new

6 Kramer's 'Ghost Stories' appeared in *Musical Meaning*, 258–87 (all further mentions of Kramer refer to the same publication; again, page references are in the text). Commenting on the same passage, Arnold Whittall points out that Kramer neglects to observe that high modernism was not served well by the institutions that traditionally supported classical music, but, in the absence of major social upheavals, could not displace them; see his *Exploring Twentieth-Century Music*, 188–90. To this should be added that the alienation expressed through modernist rupture cannot simply be reversed. Despite my admiration for aspects of postmodernist theory, I find Kramer's suggestion (286f.) that solace might be found in the postmodernist *différance* of unoriginal music defeatist (the death knell of classical music, indeed?). Although Kramer would like to eradicate it once and for all (267), originality – just like subjectivity – does not simply go away the moment someone utters the word 'postmodernism'. Problematic though these terms may have become, they are constantly re-negotiated. Rather than being the last refuge of 'sovereign, self-possessed objectivity', as Kramer claims (267), contemporary music plays a vital part in this re-negotiation: see my 'Kopien ohne Vorbild' and 'Kagel, Bachtin und eine dialogische Theorie musikalischer Intertextualität'. On a less abstract level, I have yet to come across unoriginal music in the classical sphere that has a similar aesthetic power and meaningfulness as, say, Boulez's *Répons* (but you could argue that my ideological persuasion prevents me from enjoying unoriginal music). Interestingly, all the music Kramer seems to care for deeply I would describe as original in a fairly straightforward sense.

musicology, have done a lot to challenge established canons, hegemonies, and grand narratives, McClary, Subotnik, and Kramer seem almost desperate to reassert them in the case of modernism (if only in order to criticize it). In other words, as I suggested above, they seem to be reacting to a historiography of modernism whose values they have internalized to such an extent that they have acquired a seeming identity with the object that is supposed to be thus described. This also becomes apparent in certain details. To support her claim that modernism is dependent on the aesthetics of autonomy and therefore inherently apolitical, Subotnik states that ‘the taint of charlatanism has affected political music, which is accepted and discussed as contemporary music only insofar as its political aspect is ignored’ (277), and points in a footnote to Eric Salzman’s negative evaluation of Nono and his apolitical description of Penderecki’s *Threnody* (355, n. 21). Instead of arriving at the obvious conclusion that Salzman is creating his own apoliticized, sanitized version of modernism, Subotnik uses the example as evidence for the apolitical, if not anti-political, nature of modernism itself. In other words, it is not Nono who is regarded as representative of modernism, but Salzman. Similarly, McClary all but equates modernism with formalist music theory and analysis (69ff.). In both cases, modernist music is chastised for the bias of its critical representations.

In this way, the current trend of modernism bashing is dependent on earlier accounts of modernism whose assessments are taken for granted, but whose value judgements are basically reversed. Arguably the most quintessentially modernist movement in music, the so-called Darmstadt school, may serve as an example. Anglophone accounts of the European post-war avant garde tend to stress the ideals of autonomy, structural integrity, and rational construction that integral serialism *appears* to advance; they thereby tend to focus on a narrow interpretation of the early works of Boulez and Stockhausen. This is the hermetic modernism McClary, Subotnik, and others seem to react against (though Adorno and Sartre have argued that the withdrawal of avant-garde music is itself a form of political resistance).<sup>7</sup> What is thus written out of the picture is not only the enormous stylistic diversity of the early years of the Darmstadt summer courses, but also the seminal role of such composers as Maderna and Nono, who figure prominently in most, if not all, Continental accounts. Both were adamant that their communist credentials must be reflected in their music, and this included bringing the music to ‘the masses’, as in the case of Nono touring Italy and playing his *La fabbrica illuminata* to factory workers. (The point is not whether one agrees with the politics of Nono or Maderna, or whether their stance was slightly naïve, but that the ivory tower perspective attributed to modernism, particularly in the US, by friend and foe alike, is a falsification.<sup>8</sup>) What is also conveniently forgotten is all of the ‘second generation’ of Darmstadt composers – among others Kagel, Schnebel, Ligeti, Berio, Evangelisti, Bussotti, Globokar, Cage (the last played an important role in Darmstadt, after all, and not simply that

7 For an account of Sartre’s position on musical modernism see Carroll, ‘Commitment or Abrogation?’; for an extension of Adornian thinking into more recent music see Williams, *New Music and the Claims of Modernity*.

8 For Nono’s tour of workers’ clubs see Nono, ‘Der Musiker in der Fabrik’. Nono’s texts in Stenzl’s collection provide further examples of Nono’s political commitment and its foundational role in his aesthetics. For Maderna’s idea of composition as a ‘political act’ see Dalmonte, ‘Maderna, Bruno’, *Grove Music Online*, particularly the last paragraph.

of an ‘opponent’) – not to mention such younger composers as Lachenmann, Sciarrino, or the ‘new complexity’ school. Many of these composers challenge the idea of autonomy by engaging openly with social, ideological, and political issues, and their often extremely physical and messy work makes a mockery of autonomous containment. Nevertheless, there is no question that they form an integral part of musical modernism and its legacy.<sup>9</sup> From this there should be no question about the diversity within modernism and its essentially dialectical nature. As to the question of dominance versus marginality that is raised by McClary and Subotnik, I wonder who is making this decision. From my perspective, anyone who describes the figures I have mentioned as ‘marginal’ is grossly misrepresenting modernism.

While the new-musicological critique of modernism has to be seen within the context of US American academia – particularly as a reaction to the peculiar type of modernism established in US universities (such as formalist music theory and analysis) – it is reflected in the British debate. One example of this is Georgina Born’s *Rationalizing Culture*, which takes over many of the misrepresentations mentioned above. Born provides an extremely illuminating and often entertaining account of IRCAM (though her claim to the objectivity of the anthropologist is clearly a ruse: any anthropological study of, say, a people in the South Pacific, approached with similar preconceptions, executed with such a distinctive agenda, and written in such a biased way would be justly slated). Where she flounders is in her repeated and forced attempts to integrate her analysis into an over-arching critique of modernism. Her principal mistake is that, paradoxically, she has bought IRCAM’s legitimizing rhetoric wholesale – the very rhetoric she (quite rightly) critiques. In Born’s account, then, IRCAM lies at the centre of musical modernism and Boulez is its figurehead. This is of course what IRCAM and Boulez would like one to believe, but not what critics within modernism would hold. For ‘hard-core avant gardists’ such as Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf, Boulez had reconciled himself with his own ‘failure’ by the early 1960s, and IRCAM is generally viewed as of minor importance at best.<sup>10</sup> It is again this idea of one figure being taken as the representative of an entire set of movements that enables Born to reduce modernism to a set of defining principles (40ff). As a consequence, her account of modernism is seriously flawed. For example, she states that Darmstadt was characterized by serialism ‘for some decades’ (50); accordingly there is no acknowledgement of open form, aleatory technique, experimentalism or live electronics. In other words, all of Darmstadt after the mid 1950s is largely ignored. We also learn once again that modernism was essentially apolitical (42ff, 58), an assertion which is directly contradicted by the radicalism of many of its protagonists, from Nono and Maderna, through Nikolaus A. Huber, Klaus Huber, and Rolf Riehm, to Lachenmann’s concept of an ‘aesthetic of resistance’,<sup>11</sup> not to mention the

9 Paul Attinello sees the ‘second generation’ of the ‘Darmstadt school’ as postmodern; see his ‘The Interpretation of Chaos’. I regard this view as symptomatic of a somewhat simplistic understanding of modernism as well as of the relation between modernism and postmodernism. We do agree, however, on the principal values embraced by these composers and the diversity within the ‘Darmstadt school’.

10 See Mahnkopf, *Kritik der Neuen Musik*, 68.

11 Lachenmann’s aesthetic is of seminal importance in this respect, as it demonstrates the deep commitment of an avowedly modernist composer towards social values, and an ethical position at times verging on a quasi-Freudian

(problematic) dominance of hard-left thinkers among the Darmstadt ‘house-critics’, among them Heinz-Klaus Metzger (who was more influential among composers even than Adorno), Hans G. Helms, and the young Hans-Klaus Jungheinrich. Further, we read that there are no references to non-Western music within the serialist tradition (57), which is contradicted by the long and vociferous debate about *Weltmusik* among the avant garde, triggered by Stockhausen’s *Telemusik* (1966) and his article ‘Weltmusik’, and continued in many of his works, including *Hymnen* (1966–7), as well as those of other composers, such as Pousseur (*La rose des voix*, 1982) and – in a more critical way – Kagel (*Exotica*, 1972).<sup>12</sup> Born’s assertion that ‘improvisation [in modernist music] is highly constrained and determined by score-based compositional directives’ (302) is similarly baffling if one thinks of Stockhausen’s *Aus den sieben Tagen* (1968) and many similar pieces from the time; and her description of ‘the serialist view of time as linear, [and] “duration” as mathematically quantifiable’ (57) takes no account of Stockhausen’s idea of *Momentform* and other sophisticated philosophies of time put forward by serialist thinkers.<sup>13</sup> That research published after *Rationalizing Culture* has apparently not led Born to revise her opinion is suggested by her recent confident assertion that ‘postwar musical modernism’s attempts to construct aesthetic *autarchy* and self-enclosure, through the negation or denial of reference to other musics and cultures . . . is historically aberrant’.<sup>14</sup>

It may seem unfair that I criticize a non-musicologist so harshly. One reason for my doing so is that *Rationalizing Culture* has been very influential despite its inaccuracies, and has therefore helped to propagate what I see as a fundamentally distorted picture of modernism. But, more importantly, Born’s dependence on secondary literature instead of independent readings of composers’ works shows just how pervasive this simplistic picture of modernism is. This flies in the face of recent research which has shown modernism to be much more inclusive and diverse than some critics would have it, and where such values as rational construction and structural integrity are regarded in dialectical tension with social concerns, expressive ideals, and a desire for communication. To name but a few, Trudu, Fox, and Borio/Danuser have shown that the ‘Darmstadt school’ was far more diverse than is usually acknowledged; Borio and Attinello have shed more light on the ‘second generation’ of Darmstadt during the late 1950s and early 1960s (in both works, rational construction, structural integrity, and progress in the sense of technical innovation play very minor roles); Campbell has focused attention on Boulez’s responses to Adorno’s critique of integral serialism and to recent French theorizing; Grant has shown that serialist aesthetics have a far

fixation or puritanical rigour. There are also important discussions concerning the contingent nature of the subject in a late capitalist society which complement Kramer’s position. See Lachenmann, *Musik als existentielle Erfahrung*.

12 See Stockhausen, ‘Weltmusik’. For Henri Pousseur’s ideas concerning cross-cultural influence see his *Composer (avec) des identités culturelles*. Among critical responses, in particular to Stockhausen, are Nono, ‘Geschichte und Gegenwart in der Musik von heute’, and Stenzl, ‘Orientfahrten’. A very useful introduction to *Weltmusik* is provided by Ausländer and Fritsch in *Weltmusik*. For a more extensive bibliography on the topic see my ‘“Transcending Quotation”’.

13 For conceptions of time in serialist aesthetics see Grant, *Serial Music, Serial Aesthetics*, 228–36.

14 ‘Introduction’, in *Western Music and Its Others*, 16 (italics in the original).

richer ideological background than attempts at rational construction and technical innovation; Beal has revealed some of the cultural context of the Darmstadt summer courses; Osmond-Smith has described post-war avant-garde music in terms of its expressive effects rather than its technical construction; and Carroll has pointed out the ideological foundations of the work of certain avant gardists (notably Leibowitz and Boulez).<sup>15</sup>

### The 'Othering' of Modernism

How, then, did the simplistic view of modernism ever attain the status of a truism that it now arguably has? I think the persistent vilification of musical modernism reveals a deeper issue than the reaction to a legitimizing rationalistic discourse by a later generation with different ideological concerns. Specifically, it shows all the hallmarks of 'othering', of a violent reaction to what is perceived as a threatening cultural influence (*pace* Kramer's 'death knell of classical music').<sup>16</sup> And this othering is a characteristic of certain British and American responses to musical modernism evident since at least the first half of the twentieth century. What is important here is that, more than its counterparts in literature or the visual arts, musical modernism is an essentially Continental phenomenon. That is not to say that there were no modernist composers in Britain and the US, but that – even more tellingly – these were regarded as somehow European (and the same holds true for immigrant composers in both countries). This can be observed both in the early American experimentalists' distancing of themselves from their compatriots who had studied in Europe, and in the discourse of the 'British renaissance'. As a consequence, British and American accounts of modernism are often characterized by an outsider's perspective, akin to travellers' reports telling of events 'elsewhere'. Accordingly, they tend to be distorted, whether out of enthusiasm or out of opposition: the same mixture of fascination and fear that typifies the treatment of the 'other'. In this context, the questionable, but increasingly common, umbrella concept of 'Western culture' has suggested a homogeneity that masks underlying cultural differences.

### 'Splendid Isolation': British Attitudes towards Modernism

Needless to say, there are fundamental differences between British and American responses to modernism. Nevertheless, I believe that what they have in common is the outsider's perspective on modernism; additionally they interacted variously owing to a common language and a belief in shared values. Despite a lively debate, the British perspective was dominated until well into the second half of the twentieth century by conservatism and a fervent belief in a national culture, which is contrasted to the perceived internationalism of

15 Trudu, *La 'scuola' di Darmstadt*; Fox, 'Darmstadt and the Modernist Myth'; Borio and Danuser, *Im Zenit der Moderne*; Borio, *Musikalische Avantgarde um 1960*; Attinello, 'The Interpretation of Chaos'; Campbell, 'Boulez and Expression'; Grant, *Serial Music, Serial Aesthetics*; Beal, 'Negotiating Cultural Allies'; Osmond-Smith, 'Internationalism and the Avant-garde 1945–62'; Carroll, 'Commitment or Abrogation?'. I am grateful to Osmond-Smith for providing me with a pre-publication copy of his chapter.

16 My argument here is somewhat obliquely indebted to Julian Johnson's position in his debate with Dai Griffiths; see Griffiths, 'Genre: Grammar Schoolboy Music', and Johnson, 'A Reply to Dai Griffiths'.

modernism.<sup>17</sup> This is nowhere summed up better than in Elizabeth Lutyens' account of her experiences as an early British serialist:

One was hardly ever performed; one was jeered at by the players, if silently; one was considered 'dotty' and, the chief thing, one was considered un-English. Those were the days when people talked a lot about the renaissance of British music; whereas we were writing in what was considered a 'mittel-European' style. Of course a style derived from Bach or Brahms wasn't considered un-English. But to adopt the procedures of, say, Schoenberg was almost anti-Christ, except for refugee composers.<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, Lutyens and Humphrey Searle were in the uncomfortable position of representing Britain abroad (for instance at ISCM events), while they were considered international, meaning 'un-English', at home. This defensive attitude towards the double threat of the modern and the foreign was by no means a passing phase. In the first decades of the journal *Tempo*<sup>19</sup> – subtitled *A Quarterly Review of Modern Music*, and one of the major forums for debate on contemporary music in Britain – anything that could be considered avant-garde was conspicuous by its almost complete absence, except for virulent rhetoric against it (*The Musical Times*, although perhaps more catholic in its policies, presents a similar picture). There are extensive discussions of such composers as Chávez, Benjamin, Finzi, Copland, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Kodály, Floyd, Lees, Panufnik, and Martinů, whereas the likes of Stockhausen and Boulez, Cage and Carter have to wait until the 1960s to be mentioned (although Boulez's *Le marteau* gets the briefest of mentions – in a festival report by Franz Reizenstein which berates the selection panel for being guided only by 'experiment in general and the twelve-tone system in particular'; it is described as 'weird' and 'fiendishly difficult to play').<sup>20</sup> Judgements such as those of Harold Truscott on Tcherepnin's Fourth Symphony ('such passages . . . do not shake my belief that "modernity" is an illusion or that this particular style is not more than an extension of fundamental principles found in classical or romantic harmony'), or Robert Sabin on Carlisle Floyd's *Wuthering Heights* ('it is fashionable to say that the possibilities of tonality are exhausted and that the language of traditional opera is a dead one. This is, of course, the greatest nonsense. It merely means that the minds and imaginations of some composers are too weak to forge traditional material into new forms and idioms'), both written in 1961(!), are not exceptions but the rule.<sup>21</sup>

17 Jennifer Doctor, in her *The BBC and Ultra-Modern Music*, shows that the composers associated with the Viennese School were more frequently performed and broadcast than was previously thought and that their reception was by no means exclusively negative. While this seems to suggest that Britain was quite hospitable to the internationalism of the avant garde, it is nevertheless telling that in the context of her study, too, 'ultra-modern' composers are exclusively Continental. Furthermore, she states that the openness of the BBC – contested at the best of times – was scaled back during the last years of Edward Clark's tenure as programme builder (292ff and 333) and effectively curtailed during World War II (300).

18 In Schafer, *British Composers in Interview*, chapter 9, 'Elisabeth Lutyens', 105.

19 I have studied all numbers of *Tempo* from its beginning in 1939 to the mid-1960s (when it developed into a fairly cosmopolitan, forward-looking publication).

20 Reizenstein, 'The I.S.C.M. Festival at Baden-Baden'.

21 Truscott, 'A Note on Tcherepnin's Fourth Symphony', 29; Sabin, 'Carlisle Floyd's *Wuthering Heights*', 25.

Hans Keller, the most ardent supporter of modernism among the regular contributors to *Tempo* and one of the most influential immigrants in musical circles, repeatedly rides to the defence of the Second Viennese School (usually receiving a bagful of outraged letters in return), but is decidedly critical of the then current avant garde. While he simply chose to ignore it in *Tempo*, in his other activities he was more forthright, speaking of ‘dodecaphoneys’ (specifically related to Stockhausen) and instigating the ‘Piotr Zak affair’ on the BBC (when, with the help of the pianist Susan Bradshaw, he recorded some random noises and broadcast them as *Mobile* by the spoof Polish composer Piotr Zak).<sup>22</sup> In 1963, Keller proclaimed that ‘the future will find it too boring for words’ that Britten ‘is the greatest composer alive’, ‘so self-evident will the truth have become’.<sup>23</sup>

The debates concerning national traditions in *Tempo* are in many ways even more instructive than the ones regarding the avant garde. When Keller in an article entitled ‘National Frontiers in Music’ gave a passionate and well-argued critique of the idea of national styles that was enshrined not least by the journal he was writing in, he was rebuffed by, among others, Ernest Newman, who wrote that ‘what had fundamentally happened . . . was not the mere sudden larding of the one and only God-given musical language [German music] with alien quirks of melody, rhythm, harmony and so on, but an upsurge of ancient indigenous cultures that had been too long suppressed by the tyranny of musical internationalism’.<sup>24</sup>

Interestingly, the belief in the necessity of distinct national traditions is shared not only by conservatives (although they are the most vocal). In a report about the Italian scene that is unusually glowing in its praise for Maderna and Nono, but whose sole criterion for judgement is the presence of *italianità*, John C. G. Waterhouse states:

Both [Aldo Clementi and Donatoni] learned a great deal from Stockhausen [that this is meant negatively is apparent from the context]. And I can detect little Italian spirit in most of the sounds which emanate from the Milan electronic studies, and little spirit of any kind in such of Italy’s more extreme aleatoric lunacies as have come my way [probably Bussotti and Evangelisti]. But on the whole Italy’s avant-garde shows to a surprising degree how resilient a national tradition can be even when circumstances [e.g. Darmstadt] seem to be conspiring to obliterate it.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, the pan-European brotherhood of Stockhausen, Boulez, and Nono that characterized the early years of the Darmstadt summer courses was treated with distrust even by less conservative critics (is it going too far to suggest a parallel to Britain’s fraught relations with the rest of the EU?); strangely, the internationalism of neoclassicism was never viewed as threatening, or indeed as a ‘tyranny’.

<sup>22</sup> See Carpenter, *The Envy of the World*, 199–201.

<sup>23</sup> Keller, ‘The World around Britain’.

<sup>24</sup> Keller, ‘National Frontiers in Music’; Newman, ‘Reply to Hans Keller’s “National Frontiers in Music”’, 27.

<sup>25</sup> Waterhouse, ‘The Italian Avant-garde and National Tradition’, 25.

This is not to deny that there were more progressive and cosmopolitan elements in Britain at the time, chief among them the activities of William Glock. As Glock himself described, his founding of the Dartington Summer School and the journal *The Score* (relatively short-lived and with a low circulation, as it turned out) were intended to lead 'British musical life out of the provincialism into which it had fallen'.<sup>26</sup> His greatest moment came when he was made BBC Director of Music in 1959. While he undoubtedly exerted considerable influence, one should not be under any illusions as to the obstacles he faced: despite its genial tone, his autobiography reveals clearly what he was up against – Walter Legge wrote to him that he felt 'as if Luther had just been elected Pope' – and Humphrey Carpenter's version of events confirms that Glock was not simply suffering from paranoia.<sup>27</sup>

Later developments<sup>28</sup> – such as the appearance of the 'Manchester school' in the 1960s, their founding of new ensembles, the tenure of Boulez as principal conductor of the BBC Symphony Orchestra (1971–4), and the emergence of a new generation of scholars at universities – have led to Britain becoming a country more amenable to new music, indeed one that is, perhaps for the first time since Dunstable, widely admired on the Continent. But that does not mean that resistance has not continued, nor that the old preconceptions have disappeared; on the contrary, they continue to resurface in different guises. As will become apparent below, it is far from clear that the current culturally aware and methodologically progressive critique of modernism is absolutely distinct from its conservative and nationalist precursor.

### Modernism as Academicism: the US Perspective

As I see it, the American reaction to modernism is less marked by conservative defensiveness, at least as far as composers are concerned. The reception of European modernism was distorted, however, by the split between 'experimentalist, West-coast, down-town' composers and their 'academic, East-coast, and up-town' counterparts. This was first formulated by Henry Cowell in 1931:

The real division among the modern American composers now, a sharp one, is between those who regard music as something for the purpose of amusement, and those who regard it as a medium for expressing greater depths of feeling. The former group . . . is composed of men who have studied for the most part in Paris, and have become distinctly influenced by certain modern French philosophical trends. The latter group are for the most part made up of men who have studied

26 Glock, *Notes in Advance*, 92.

27 See Glock, *Notes in Advance*, 97–113 (quotation from Walter Legge on 99); and Carpenter, *The Envy of the World*, 193ff.

28 In several of which Glock was at least a partial instigator.

in America, and who . . . are building up a style distinctly rooted in the feelings and traditions of the country.<sup>29</sup>

Ever since then, European modernism has been associated in the US with the 'East-coast, academic' composers and thus opposed to the more 'authentically American' experimentalists. As far as I am aware, the 'East-coast, academic' composers in their turn associated themselves with the European avant garde. In doing so they tended to seize on aspects with which they themselves were more comfortable, and these were primarily concerned with the ideology of autonomy: hence, for instance, the 'hard-core formalism' of the early years of *Perspectives of New Music*. Thus, the representation of the avant garde by 'East-coast, academic' composers, who have mostly shied away from the messy politicization and rampant radicalism of Darmstadt, has contributed to the one-sided view of modernism in general. The irony is that the European avant garde, for its part, has overwhelmingly sympathized with the American experimental tradition and, on the whole, has shown little interest in the academic school.<sup>30</sup> There have also been many exchanges between European composers and American experimentalists (Cage's and Tudor's visits to Darmstadt, the latter's performances of Stockhausen's and Kagel's work, Kagel's and Pousseur's stints as guest professors at SUNY Buffalo, Heinz-Klaus Metzger's championing of the Cage school, and so forth). What this shows is that, just as in the case of Born falling for IRCAM's rhetoric, new-musicological critics of modernism seem to have taken the university composers' legitimizing discourse at face value, as if it really was an adequate representation of modernist aesthetic values.

Arguably, most English-language criticism of musical modernism is coloured in one way or another by the split between the two traditions within American music, and the (false) association of the European avant garde with the 'East-coast, academic' school. This is apparent in all publications discussed so far. McClary hinges her critique on Babbitt, who is portrayed as representative of 'avant-garde music' in general; Schoenberg and Boulez are then associated with Babbitt (and not the other way round!). Subotnik concedes in a footnote that the situation in Europe is slightly different from that which she describes (357, n. 38), which can only mean that she is concerned with the American situation – although her unqualified term 'contemporary music' and the choice of Schoenberg as main representative do not suggest this. Kramer states that 'in music this era [of modernist aesthetics] was carried forward after the Second World War by the rise of the academic avant garde' (271) – which, if it makes any sense at all, can only refer to the American tradition (no major European avant

29 Nicholls, *American Experimental Music*, 4; quoted from Frank R. Rossiter, *Charles Ives and his America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 222.

30 Mauricio Kagel's biting report from his lecture tour in the US in 1963 – 'Aus U.S.A.' – may serve as an indication. See also the editor's somewhat indignant comments on Kagel's article: Stadelman, 'Kagel's "From the U.S.A."'. By contrast, Kagel always lionized Cage. He reports of Cage's legendary 1958 visit to Darmstadt that it 'contributed to the downfall of the modern serialist myth instigated by the academics of dodecaphonism', and that his 'propositions concerning chance technique, his new old studies of time and his insistence on the necessity of greater interpretive freedom have incorporated problems of a greater significance than the structuring of a couple of twelve-note rows'. This leads him to proclaim that 'a new epoch has begun in contemporary music' (Kagel, 'John Cage en Darmstadt 1958', 484, my translation). Some ten years later, Kagel is equally unreserved in his praise of Cage: see his 'Über J.C.'. Dieter Schnebel takes much the same position: see his *Denkbare Musik*.

gardist has been associated with a university in the post-war years, though some of them taught at conservatoires at later stages in their career, beginning mostly in the 1970s; only Pousseur has taught at a university). From Kramer's quotation we would thus have to conclude either that post-war modernism is an American phenomenon or that its European incarnation is derivative of the American. Born's account, finally, relies heavily on a false dichotomy between postmodernist experimentalism (the good guys) and high modernism (the bad guys), a binarism that is also expressed by McClary, Subotnik, and Kramer. I cannot say whether these authors provide an accurate portrait of the American situation (although I doubt it),<sup>31</sup> but their representation of modernism as a whole is singularly biased.

### US Influence on the British Debate

The origin of the binary opposition between the experimentalist and academic traditions within the US has already been discussed, but one link to the present whose influence is clearly detectable (notably in Born) needs to be mentioned, particularly as it connects the British and American perspectives. Michael Nyman's *Experimental Music* – still an invaluable source regarding many developments that were in their infancy at the time of publication – is predicated on a fundamental split between what the author rather bizarrely terms 'the post-Renaissance tradition' and experimentalism. In fact the book begins by declaring the intention 'to isolate and identify what experimental music is, and what distinguishes it from the music of such avant-garde composers as Boulez, Kagel, Xenakis, Birtwistle, Berio, Stockhausen, and Bussotti, which is conceived and executed along the well-trodden but sanctified path of the post-Renaissance tradition'.<sup>32</sup> As becomes clear in this first chapter (1–30), the distinction is not developed from an analysis of those traditions' characteristic traits, but stated *a priori* according to the nationalities or domiciles of the composers so labelled: whatever characteristics are assigned to the two traditions *follow from* the split by nationality already undertaken, rather than providing the rationale for the comparison. Accordingly, all the composers in the 'experimental camp' just happen to be British or American, whereas all 'post-Renaissance' composers turn out to be associated with the European avant garde. Whereas this distinction *between* the two camps is essentialized, the differences *within* either tradition are marginalized. In this way, minimalism becomes a direct outgrowth of the Cage school, and composers as diverse as those mentioned are conflated into the single category 'post-Renaissance' (which is simply absurd in connection with Kagel or Bussotti, for instance). As support, Nyman contrasts quotations from Cage and Stockhausen as if both were representative of 'their schools'. In contrast to many other critics, Nyman is keenly aware of the more experimental developments within the European avant garde but has to resort to rhetoric in order to disavow them. Thus, he concludes a singularly biased discussion of Stockhausen – in which the latter's ideas are judged solely by the

31 These doubts are confirmed by Straus in 'The Myth of "Serial Tyranny"'. See also Shreffler, 'The Myth of Empirical Historiography'. Although Shreffler makes a number of pertinent comments, she does not question the validity of Straus's central argument.

32 Nyman, *Experimental Music*, 1.

standard of Cagean experimentalism rather than Stockhausen's own conception – by remarking that 'despite Stockhausen's outward conversion to a process-music, he has in fact changed very little – once a European art composer, always a European art composer' (the ultimate insult for Nyman).<sup>33</sup> That there may be points of contact below full-scale 'conversion' (which is hardly the artistically most interesting form of influence) seems not to have occurred to the author.

Anyone who is not obsessed with national traditions would see that the 'second generation' of the 'Darmstadt school' – to which should be added Aldo Clementi and the young Donatoni – has as good a claim to being considered part of Cage's legacy as do the minimalists. But of course it is the *national* in the tradition that is really at the heart of the argument. Nyman seems implicitly to recognize this in his preface to the second edition, when he questions the 'ethnocentric' perspective of the book, stating that it is 'firmly positioned on a US/UK axis, since the "tradition" started in the US and transplanted itself into England . . . [fostering] this sense of unified Anglo-American experimental *tradition*' (xvii). While he goes on to mention Michael von Biel and Henning Christiansen as possible counterexamples, their obscurity can hardly be coincidental in the face of more obvious candidates; in the case of Christiansen, Nyman notes that he had worked with Joseph Beuys – seemingly unaware of the 'post-Renaissance' composer Kagel's close cooperation with Beuys and other Fluxus artists. (To add a personal note here, when my peers and I first explored new music in Germany during the late 80s and early 90s the notion that we would have to make a decision for either 'Cage's school' or Stockhausen's, or that these were mutually exclusive, would have sounded absurd to us.)

The reason Nyman cannot allow a European experimental tradition is obvious. It would undermine the claim of a distinct national tradition for American experimentalism to which he is attempting to align a British offshoot by emphasizing the latter's anti-European credentials: the 'common enemy' is supposed to create a bond. This binary opposition between American experimentalism and the European avant garde, in which the former is privileged, has become deeply ingrained among other British scholars, Georgina Born being an example. Even such a normally balanced and acute observer as David Nicholls has remarked that 'many of [the New York School's] stylistic mannerisms were subsequently kidnapped by the European avant garde, including Boulez, Stockhausen, and Berio. As a consequence, indeterminacy and its American progenitors became as much a part of Eurocentric high modernism as were the techniques they should in theory have been opposed to.'<sup>34</sup> Who should 'in theory' be opposed to what, and exactly why, is far from clear, but the word 'kidnap' seems to suggest that for European composers to use techniques developed by their American peers is somehow illegitimate. This argument is troubling not only because it essentializes national traditions, but also because it appears to be based on dubious notions of authenticity and originality.

33 Nyman, *Experimental Music*, 28f.

34 Nicholls, 'Transethnicism and the American Experimental Tradition', 589. Nicholls' earlier 'Getting Rid of the Glue: the Music of the New York School', presents a more detailed and altogether more measured account of the New York School's influence on the European avant garde (see in particular 349–51).

## Conclusion

The current vogue of modernism bashing in British and American criticism follows a tradition of misrepresentation of European composers by detractors and defenders alike. This is neither to deny that discourse on modernism within these countries has been lively and pluralist, and that it has included ardent defences of modernism, nor to suggest that Continental European opinion has been unflinching, or even predominantly, pro-modernist. Nevertheless, my aim here has been to analyse and to offer a critique of certain problematic tropes peculiar to the Anglo-American debate. As mentioned at the outset, it is unclear whether the different tendencies I have outlined simply combine to form the current anti-modernist atmosphere in parts of academia and the larger cultural world, or whether there are intrinsic historical links between them. However, it seems fair to say that both American and British views of modernism as a specifically European phenomenon are influenced by an outsider's perspective that has led to a degree of distancing and often to a defence of national traditions against the perceived threat of an internationalized avant garde. This defence has taken different forms in Britain and in the US, as the British national tradition defined itself as conservative and more traditionally nationalist, and the American as more radical. But where they coincide is in tending to essentialize a division between their respective national traditions and European modernism. Moreover, there are interchanges between the different positions. I have pointed out how Nyman, Born, and Nicholls adopt the American experimentalist view from a British perspective, in Born's case combined with the influence of the new musicology (evidenced by her references). Conversely, Kramer appears to link the ideological critique of modernism by the new musicology with a kind of cultural conservatism that harks back to the debates of the first half of the twentieth century. Thus, although the current new musicological critique of modernism does not openly operate with nationalist arguments, its view of modernism follows the pattern of 'othering' that has been established long before. Ironically, this view is dependent on an earlier apologia of modernism which had misleadingly constructed it in the image of the American 'academic tradition' and, accordingly, as an antipode to American experimentalism.

If we want to explore the richness and diversity of modernist music, we have to move beyond regarding the European avant garde in terms of the split within American contemporary music: Boulez cannot be reduced to an embodiment of Babbitt's aesthetics or an antipode to Cage.<sup>35</sup> Now that the post-war avant gardes have become historical phenomena, it is time to reassess their legacies as distinct from the legitimizing and delegitimizing polemics of their origins. As with the music of any other period, we have constantly to re-evaluate modernism in the light of recent discourses, challenging narratives, canons, and dogmas where necessary, rather than reasserting them.<sup>36</sup> Recent defenders of modernist

35 For an informative discussion of the interchange between the American and European traditions see Shreffler, 'The Myth of Empirical Historiography'.

36 In this respect, McClary's evident puzzlement at Linda Dusman's deployment of what the former terms 'positions of postmodernism' in defence of modernism is telling (see McClary, 'Response to Linda Dusman', 149). This is not only inconsequential – McClary herself has provided brilliant examples of the analysis of past music with current theories, so why not do the same with modernism? – but also methodologically questionable, as it presupposes a dichotomy between modernism and postmodernism, as well as fixed definitions, sets of characteristics, and allegiances for

music, including figures mentioned here, have generally mothballed or at least qualified such values as structural integrity, technical innovation, and rational construction.<sup>37</sup> This has also led them to focus on a wider range of composers and directions rather than continuing the tired obsession with the early integral serialism of Stockhausen, Boulez, or Babbitt, or their supposed precursors within the Viennese School. It is time detractors of modernism did the same.

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both. I don't think this position is helpful in understanding either modernism or postmodernism (why this constant need for dichotomies, particularly from scholars who would probably describe themselves as postmodernists?). In my view, studying modernist music with postmodernist methodology is not only possible, but self-evident, indeed probably necessary. For an account of the relation between modernism and postmodernism see my 'Collage vs. Compositional Control'.

37 To add another personal note, these are certainly not the reasons why I first became enthralled by Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, Stravinsky's *Rite*, Boulez's *Marteau sans maître*, Stockhausen's *Gruppen*, Ligeti's *Lontano*, Berio's *Sinfonia*, or Nono's String Quartet – though I do admire the intellectual rigour of their construction and the consequence of their artistic vision.

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