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Review Essay

Musical Modernism, Sanitized

By Björn Heile

Music and Decadence in European Modernism: The Case of Central and Eastern Europe. Stephen Downes. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xiv + 371. \$95.00 (cloth).

British Music and Modernism, 1895-1960. Matthew Riley, ed. Farnham: Ashgate, 2010. Pp. xvi + 329. \$124.95 (cloth).

Musical Modernism at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century. David Metzger. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. x + 254. \$93.00 (cloth).

These three books on musical modernism--or music and modernism--cover, chronologically, the period from 1860 to the immediate past and, geographically, the area from Britain through Western Europe (excluding the Iberian Peninsula) to Central and Eastern Europe. This breadth is testimony to what Ben Earle in British Music and Modernism, 1895-1960 aptly calls an "odd counter-movement" to the anti-modernism which dominated Anglo-American musicology during the late 1980s and 1990s, whereby "recent commentators have been falling over each other in their haste to make more or less any late nineteenth- or twentieth-century music available to receive this label [modernism]" (301). Earle is more concerned with the

fraying edges that appear in considerations of earlier periods of music, as well as with the genre of the symphony, but the same note of caution could be raised regarding the opposite chronological boundary. Music studies have traditionally employed a broader concept of modernism than most neighboring disciplines, typically, for instance, regarding postmodernism as an aspect of modernism and concurrent with it, rather than as its successor. Although I broadly sympathize with this position, there is a danger that the label may lose its critical edge as the historical as well as stylistic and generic boundaries of musical modernism become ever wider. Aspects of these books under review illustrate the danger of such a position. Let us begin with Stephen Downes's book on decadence. There is no mistaking the significance of this work. Downes argues that "decadence is a crucial yet often misunderstood aspect of European modernism" (back cover). It should be viewed, he argues, not only as a form of degeneration but also as one of renewal. This runs the danger of reinstating the conventional morality that decadence so signally rejected, a paradox that is probably unavoidable in any study of the subject and one that Downes doesn't entirely escape despite addressing it intelligently. The breadth of the material discussed and the depth of the scholarship brought to bear by Downes on this matter are astounding, as are the subtlety of his readings. There is one major qualification though: as impressive as his bibliography is, both in sheer size and in intellectual ambition, it is overwhelmingly dominated by English-language titles. It's as if

Downes refers to publications in the language of the particular culture under study only if and when he absolutely has to. We seem to have reached a stage where what members of a community think about their own culture no longer needs to concern us; only the thoughts of Anglophone writers, or those selected to be translated into English (in whatever quality) are taken into account.

The core of the book is arguably made up of the triad: Wagner - Nietzsche - (Thomas) Mann. This opens up another slight problem, one that is surprising considering that Downes built his reputation on authoritative studies of the Polish composer Karol Szymanowski: the model of cultural change and innovation that is implicit in this book is that of center and periphery, with ideas emanating from the Austro-German musical and intellectual "heartlands" being adopted, usually with a time lag, in the far-flung provinces of the Austro-Hungarian or Russian empire. I assume that this wasn't Downes's intention, but it is instructive to see how all chapters either begin with or go back to at least one of the central figures named above, and how most if not all the critical terms and analytical concepts are derived from a discussion of their work and are subsequently applied to other figures. To be sure, Downes covers a broad range of "non-Germanic" composers, both canonical and not--Tchaikovsky, Karłowicz, Bartók, Rachmaninov, Lyadov, Szymanowski (curiously the Czech lands are overlooked)--but the space devoted to them is dwarfed by that given to Wagner, Strauss, Wolf, Mahler, Berg, Schreker, and Schoenberg.

Perhaps my most substantial reservation, however, concerns methodology. The back cover accurately describes Downes's approach thus: "Through the use of critical and cultural theory . . . musical works are contextualized, and the relationship of music and musical discourse to wider cultural issues is scrutinized." The method is further characterized as "combining close analysis with hermeneutic interpretation." The procedure is indebted to Lawrence Kramer's idea of the "hermeneutic window", which was very influential during the 1990s (Kramer is repeatedly cited approvingly, although this particular text is not mentioned).¹ My concern is not over the question of whether music has meaning, which is arguably overrated. Rather, the more important questions are, among others, what sort of meaning does music have, for whom, and where does it reside? The problem with the idea of hermeneutic windows is that music is read in conjunction with preconceived ideas derived from the wider cultural history of the era (usually contemporary writers). The process is a bit like viewing Rorschach tests: once something has been suggested to us, it becomes tempting to see the image in that way. Likewise, once we have been asked to hear music as expressive of ideas related to decadence, those aspects of the music most supportive of such a view become more sharply focused. But any such interpretation emphasizes certain aspects of the object at the expense of others: once you have identified the inkblot, say, as a rabbit, you become blind to its actual morphological properties. Moreover, you can only see an image as representing one object at a time (either rabbit or

chicken, never a rabbit and chicken); ambiguity is closed down. In the same way, while musical hermeneuticists typically go out of their way to point out that their interpretation is just one of many possible interpretations, the "one meaning at a time" nature of their interpretations makes it impossible for them to conceive of genuine ambiguity. Moreover, those aspects of the music that seem congruent with the reading are emphasized over those that aren't.

These basic problems of hermeneutic methodology reappear in Downes's account at a structural level. In deriving the characteristics of decadence primarily from writers--the aforementioned Nietzsche, Mann and Wagner--Downes establishes an association between ideas and musical structures that is subsequently rediscovered, with more or less justification, in other musical works. Wagner is particularly important in this process, since his dual status as both writer and composer allows for a plausible linking of literary ideas to musical structure. But while it is one thing to make this connection within Wagner's own oeuvre, it is another to extend that connection to cover a wide range of composers whose efforts may not have been so easily assimilated into this creative picture. Note how musical decadence, then, occurs typically at one remove: the music is expressive of ideas identified first in writings. Though some of those writings, such as Baudelaire's and Nietzsche's, responded to Wagner, their readings of his music are guided primarily by the operatic plots and not by specifically musical structures. Take as

a counter-example, the modernism of Schoenberg's music. Although it is possible and fruitful to relate Schoenberg's modernism to that of Joyce, Schnitzler, or Kandinsky, it would be perverse to argue that his music owes its modernism to such a comparison. Its modernism is primary and sui generis. This is not the case, it seems to me, with the majority of the cases discussed by Downes.

Granted, Downes is a very subtle and theoretically astute analyst (much more so than Kramer, for instance) and there are few cases where I would directly contradict his readings.

Nevertheless, another limitation is arguably his overwhelming concern with pitch structure. This is problematic in itself, but the issue is exacerbated by his apparent conviction that the connotative meanings of certain structures are essentially invariant. Thus, time and again, a minor sixth resolving down to the fifth is "tragic," the minor subdominant a "symbol of suffering" (301), and the chord of the flat submediant (a favorite harmonic device in the nineteenth century) "doomed, ephemeral, [and unstable]" (102). At this stage, Downes quotes Susan McClary, according to whom the flat submediant's "deviance [from the diatonic] intensifies its functional instability--its unnatural generation demands resolution all the more" (102). This assumption of diatonic normativity is quite problematic for a repertoire in which chromatic harmony is fully normalized. While some of these chromaticisms may not entirely lose their former associations, to assume that they remain unchanged is contentious at best. The problem here is an inappropriate teleology based on the

deficiencies of traditional harmonic theory. Since the latter was grounded in diatonic functions (triads based on the primary steps of the scale without accidentals), chromatic harmony appeared either as a degeneration of diatonicism (with chromatic harmonies as "deviant" doppelgänger of their diatonic counterparts), or as a transitional phase towards atonality or indeed dodecaphony.

Downes's argument relies heavily on such teleological narratives of decline or progress. Yet, there is nothing about chromatic harmony per se that justifies such readings. It is a different kind of harmony than either diatonic or atonal, but it has its own logic and is not transitional as such (it would be just as possible to regard diatonic harmony as a transition between modal and chromatic harmony). It is instructive in this context that, although Downes cites neo-Riemannian theory, he does not employ it himself (the one occasion when he tries to do so [143] includes a basic mistake). Neo-Riemannian theory is an approach to chromatic harmony that describes its own underlying logic without recourse to a supposedly normative diatonic system. For instance, the flat submediant is easily explained in neo-Riemannian theory: there is nothing inherently "deviant" about it. If viewed through a neo-Riemannian lens, would it still be possible to call the repertoire discussed here "decadent"?

The problems don't quite end there: Downes frequently refers to the associations of keys, particularly when discussing operas. There is a lot to be said in general about focusing on pitch structure when discussing opera; after all, it's not what the

audience is most concerned with. More specifically, Downes makes a lot of how, for instance, in Strauss's Salome, the Neapolitan D minor is "associated . . . with Jewishness" (158). Not only is it questionable that this association would be made by audiences, it is virtually impossible: it requires perfect pitch, sole focus on the pitch structure (as if nothing else demands their attention) and an ability to compare, recall, and relate key centers. So, what basis is there for positing aspects of musical meaning that cannot be heard? This brings me back to my earlier remarks about musical meaning. The question is not what music can mean or can be made to mean, but for whom it has what kind of meaning, and where that meaning resides. There is a wealth of material and no shortage of perceptive observations about music and decadence in this book, but what it really says about music's role in a wider cultural context and how it relates and contributes to surrounding debates is not clear to me.

British Music and Modernism, 1895-1960 does not suffer from the same problems. One reason for this, though, is that it is much less ambitious. Indeed, perhaps the biggest problem is that the raison d'être of the book is not entirely clear. The title is cunning, though, and Matthew Riley, in his introduction, draws attention to the "and" (3), which leaves open the question of whether the two terms in the title meet or remain irreconcilable; a question to which the book as a whole does not provide a firm answer. So, what is the intention? "This book is not the last word on British music and modernism before 1960. . . . Its main

contribution lies in the application of new ideas and theoretical approaches. . . . The book is not intended as an exercise in affirmative 're-branding'" (3). This isn't exactly revisionist (or particularly programmatic in any other way). Granted, there is more detail on the "new ideas and theoretical approaches," but in this respect, too, the book is not more than the sum of its parts. Whatever innovative approaches found within are due to the individual persuasions of the contributors; no overall theoretical angle or ideological perspective emerges (not that that's necessarily a bad thing). As far as newness is concerned, while contributors' approaches are obviously more or less advanced or up to date, there is no truly groundbreaking stuff here. Indeed, as if the subject matter influenced the theoretical approaches, quite a lot of work is noticeably cautious and resistant to, or uninterested in, "Theory." Instead, there is a lot of sober historical work (one hesitates to use the p-word--positivism): on liberal music critics in the post-Victorian age (Matthew Riley), Elgar reception in the Manchester Guardian (Meirion Hughes), changes in the reception of Schoenberg's work (Deborah Heckert), the work of Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes in London (Gareth Thomas), etc. Much of this work is illuminating, although at times over-long. In other instances, the case seems overstated. While, for example, Heckert is clearly on to something when relating the sudden shift in the reception of Schoenberg to the impact of art criticism on musical debates, her linking this to the specific influence of Roger Fry seems tenuous. While the discourse employed

by the critics writing on the 1914 performance of Schoenberg's Five Orchestral Pieces seems generally informed by contemporary art criticism, it is notable that they do not employ Fry's terms. Meanwhile, in his apparent attempt to provide a comprehensive chronicle of the reception of the Ballets Russes in London, Thomas misses a trick by not looking more deeply into the changing attitudes to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, modernism, and cosmopolitanism behind the sharp decline in popularity during the 1920s. He cites some fascinating material (among, on the whole, too many, too extensive quotations), which sadly remains largely unexamined. Where a larger theoretical framework is invoked, things don't always go well. In Thomas Irvine's usage, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's concepts of "codes" (e.g. "Authenticity vs. Artificiality") and "collapsing codes" (e.g. "Authenticity = Artificiality") seem little more than a lukewarm reheating of dialectics (199), and indeed Irvine indulges in rather problematic binaries. Constant Lambert, who, elsewhere in the book (in Tim Barringer's contribution), is portrayed as a champion of jazz and a formidable reciter of William Walton and Edith Sitwell's Façades, is constantly painted as a proponent of art for art's sake, just so that Irvine's chosen hero, Walter Leigh, is set off to better advantage. To call Lambert a "minor denizen of Bloomsbury" is as unjust as regarding his Music Ho! as sympathizing with "the kind of modernism that privileges the artist's hermetic utterance" (206).²

The cornerstone of the book is arguably provided by two contrasting readings of Vaughan-Williams's Third and Fourth Symphonies, respectively. The clue is that Daniel Grimley reads the Third "Pastoral" Symphony, which is commonly regarded as one of the composer's most conservative, as modernist, while J. P. E. Harper-Scott questions the modernist credentials of what is usually seen as the most progressive of Vaughan Williams's works, the "Antic" Fourth Symphony. There is no direct contradiction here, as both argue along different lines, Grimley privileging cultural meaning and analyzing musical structures accordingly and Harper-Scott focusing on formalist analysis (although he is by no means blind to cultural meaning). Both contributions are impressive. Grimley challenges the still dominant assumption that the pastoralism of the Third represents a nostalgic evocation of "the green and pleasant land" (of England), relating it instead to the battlefields of the Somme and understanding it as an expression of mourning. Harper-Scott, by contrast, argues that the high levels of dissonance in Vaughan-Williams's Fourth Symphony are little more than parodic surface elements superimposed on an essentially consonant, tonal, diatonic background structure, which, contrary to, for instance, Stravinsky's use of parody, are not used to modernist ends. To demonstrate this, Harper-Scott presents extraordinarily complex Schenkerian graphs. Sophisticated though this analysis undoubtedly is, it raises a number of questions. Is the strict distinction between surface and structure, which Harper-Scott's discussion relies on, really

appropriate from a modernist perspective? Are his repeated normative invocations of what is "quite unthinkable in a modernist work" (191), or, in other words, what modernist works should be like, justifiable? Is Schenkerian analysis the final arbiter on whether a work is modernist or not? As Earle points out in his contribution, modernism "cannot be said to reside merely in the presence of certain technical features: dissonance, atonality, rhythmic/metrical dislocation, 12-note technique, heightened structural ambiguity and so forth" (316).

The book is concluded with two studies devoted to the composers who probably have the best claim to be the first genuine British modernists: Elizabeth Lutyens and Humphrey Searle-- although it is important to note that both would appear moderate or even timid when compared to their contemporaries on the continent. Laurel Parsons makes a plausible case that Lutyens's claim of having been inspired to embrace dodecaphony by Henry Purcell is much less fanciful than it may first seem. Why this argument required quite so much biographical story-telling is not clear however, nor why it needs to be couched in such clichéd dichotomies as "boldness, originality and experimentation" (270) and "courage to defy convention" (274) on one side vs. "the nostalgic pastoralism characteristic of much British music of the early twentieth century" on the other (270). One doesn't have to fully sign up to Grimley's view to see that it is a little more complicated than that, and that's the one lesson that comes out loud and clear in this book.

I have already cited Ben Earle's contribution approvingly, and indeed his spirited advocacy on behalf of Humphrey Searle, in particular his *First Symphony* (1953), is timely and convincing. That is not to deny, however, that a number of odd notes are sounded here. In regarding Searle as unjustly neglected, Earle seems to find it necessary to polemicize against a later generation of British modernist composers, particularly the so-called Manchester School of the 1960s. Consisting primarily of Walter Goehr, Peter Maxwell Davies, and Harrison Birtwistle, the Manchester School were more readily accepted by their contemporary critics and audiences than Searle had been around a decade earlier. This is, Earle suggests, quoting Paul Griffiths, due to the by then more "propitious" cultural climate (301). Instead of attempting to redress the balance, Earle seems to argue that Searle's rejection by predominantly unsympathetic critics and audiences is proof of his authentic modernism, whereas the widespread acceptance of the Manchester School demonstrates that their modernism is only skin-deep. Earle is justified in pointing to the problematic of the institutionalization of modernism but he seems strangely unaware of the irony that, according to his own logic, his advocacy undermines the very modernist credentials that he so prizes in Searle (elsewhere, on pp. 293-4 and pp. 297-300, he seems to have no hesitation to regard academic interest as a sign of institutionalization which he views as inimical to true modernism). In rejecting the institutionalization of modernism (a regrettable but most likely unavoidable process), Earle maneuvers

himself into a corner: "one wonders whether 'propitious circumstances' for modernism might not be the opposite of what [Griffiths] has in mind. Is it not precisely unpropitiousness that is modernism's essential prerequisite?" (300). This returns us to the worst clichés of modernism-as-suffering and modernism-as-refusal: the visionary artist who suffers Christ-like for the philistinism of the bourgeoisie and who regards rejection as approbation and success as failure. Indeed, Searle quotes the more problematic sections of Adorno's Philosophy of New Music in support of his position. In this world view, Adrian Leverkühn is the only true modernist composer--no wonder he is fictional. What's more, the occasion for the Adornian connection is tenuous. Earle points to a "failure of musical continuity, of communication even" (314) between bars 70 and 75 in the first movement of the First Symphony. Rather than regarding the music as poorly composed, Earle argues that "it would be more productive to read the faltering coherence of this music as stemming from necessity, a necessity that for Adorno, of course, would have the full force of history behind it" (315). What if this is no heroic failure, but just a technical deficiency, and a rather slight one at that? That is a rather more likely explanation given that Searle himself admitted that he had no model in adapting dodecaphony to the requirements of the symphony. There is a lot to be said for raising Searle's status, but there is no need to base his modernist credentials on a shop-worn suffering-hero narrative, nor on belittling the status of others who faced fewer difficulties,

nor on aggrandizing slight flaws as failures of communication that have the full force of history behind them.

On the whole, the book enriches and deepens our understanding of British music and modernism, but it doesn't substantially alter it, but maybe that would be too much to ask --and maybe it doesn't need altering.

Metzer's book, finally, brings us to the present, or at least the immediate past. His intention is to prove that "Modernism . . . remains vital. It has not been supplanted [by postmodernism]. It draws upon a wealth of ideals and precedents and is fueled by continuing impulses" (1). To that purpose he undertakes two kinds of inquiries: into what he calls "compositional states" and "the act of expression" (8). The compositional states are purity, silence, the fragmentary, lament, and sonic flux, each of which is given a chapter. Metzer claims novelty for this approach. To be honest, I have not quite understood what a compositional state is and what really distinguishes it from, say, a theme. In terms of the latter, Metzer is by no means the first scholar to study the use or evocation of silence, for instance, and his actual analyses are not radically unlike previous studies, but never mind. And why would these states be modernist and indeed act as touchstones for identifying modernism? Again, I am not entirely sure, although it would seem that the argument becomes circular here: they are modernist because modernist composers employ them. It is also noteworthy that in the earlier chapters, Metzer pairs the composers who form the primary focus of his study with earlier

ones whose modernist credentials are already safely established: Stockhausen--(Jonathan) Harvey ("Chapter 1: Purity"); Webern--Nono--Sciarrino ("Chapter 2: Modern Silence"); Nono--Kurtág ("Chapter 3: the Fragmentary"). Once the procedure is established, this grounding in "the classics" is gradually abolished: Ligeti--Saariaho ("Chapter 4: Lament"); Saariaho--Lachenmann--(Olga) Neuwirth ("Chapter 5: Sonic Flux").

Whatever the epistemological status and consistency of the analytical terms chosen, Metzger puts them to good use. He is a fine writer and subtle critic, and his readings are rarely less than illuminating. He is also the only writer covered here who draws from secondary literature in several languages (English, French, and German) in almost equal measure. His studies of Kurtág's Kafka Fragments and Lachenmann's Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern are particularly inspiring. At some points, though, he obsesses about minutiae in the scores that are not directly related to the actual music. For instance, he makes much of the fact that the mandolin's part is "the loudest (piano)" in Webern's Five Pieces for Orchestra Op. 10/4. In fact, though, Webern almost certainly notated dynamics pragmatically, rather than literally, to create the right sounding balance between naturally soft and loud instruments. The passage in question features a melodic line passing from the mandolin to the muted trumpet, muted trombone and, after a break, muted violin. In all likelihood, the line is meant to change color but not volume between mandolin, trumpet and trombone, and in order to achieve

that, Webern had to notate the latter two with softer dynamics (I also don't hear the movement as fragmented as Metzger would have us believe). Similar to Downes, this preoccupation with the score, at the expense of performance, is a particular problem in Metzger's approach to opera, as in the case of the Lachenmann and Neuwirth's Lost Highway (on David Lynch's film).

My real concern, though, is with Metzger's weaknesses as a theorist. Given his undisputed strengths as a critic, this perhaps shouldn't matter so much, but, as the title of his book makes clear, he wants it to be more than a series of critical essays on individual pieces, and this is where the problems begin. Throughout the book there is little sense of what musical modernism is for, what its social function might be other than to serve the aesthetic delectation of a small, highly educated, cultured and overwhelmingly upper middle-class elite and, pace Bourdieu, to allow them to show off their cultural capital. In the introduction, modernism is almost exclusively defined through material and compositional technique. Astonishingly enough, though Metzger cites Adorno extensively, he does so only in relation to the Materialstand (the objective state of the material) and subjectivity; there is no concern with the social and ideological functions of new music, which is what drove Adorno to raise these issues in the first place. This neglect of social function and ideological meaning also seems to be behind Metzger's choice of period. Time and again, he argues that the time around 1980 marks an important shift between an emphasis on construction in the

post-war period and the concern for subjectivity (18) or, indeed, "music of expressive candor and immediacy" (19) in the late-modernist works. So what happened with the 1960s and 1970s? Repeatedly, Metzger switches between the post-war or even pre-war avant-gardes (in the case of Webern) and the late modernism of the 1980s and after, but he never really alights on anything in between. It may well be that he simply doesn't know this music very well (there are some signs of that), but maybe this avoidance also has something to do with his conflicted approach to postmodernism. While he on one hand seems to argue that the familiar modernism/postmodernism dichotomy is obsolete, on the other he is hesitant to deal with any music that could be described as postmodernist (and which might well share his compositional states). In the end, in a curiously imperialistic, hegemonic image, he draws up an imaginary map centering on modernism and pluralism (245-246)--an odd technique given that he shows no interest in actual cultural geography, seeming instead to take the unmarked universalism of modernist music at face value. So modernism has simply become the mainstream, a default option, with separate tendencies in "removed lands" (246) but still defined by the main continent. And there was I thinking that modernism might have something to do with resistance.

There is another reason why the emphasis on 1980 is concerning. It excludes 1968 and the hey-day of socially and politically committed music.³ Indeed, for many, 1980 marked the moment of resignation (particularly in the case of Nono, a life-

long radical Marxist) coinciding with the rise of neo-conservatism (it would be facile to draw a causal connection, but it's clearly more than an accidental correlation). From that perspective, the return to expression that Metzger diagnoses and indeed celebrates takes on a more problematic undertone: is this anything more than the restitution of bourgeois subjectivity concomitant with the withdrawal from political engagement into the private sphere? While it is a cause for celebration to see recent modernist music discussed by a serious English-speaking scholar, this is the kind of question that such a study should ask, and this Metzger fails to do.

The lesson to be drawn from these three, quite different books is that while there is a lot to be said for a broad and inclusive definition of musical modernism, we should be wary of diluting the concept too far by including everything produced within ever widening historical boundaries and by losing sight of its radical and subversive potential.

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- 1 Lawrence Kramer, "Tropes and Windows: An Outline of Musical Hermeneutics," Music as Cultural Practice, 1800-1900 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 1-20.
 - 2 Constant Lambert, Music Ho! A Study of Music in Decline (London: Faber and Faber, 1933).
 - 3 Recent accounts of the impact of 1968 on music include Robert Adlington, ed., Sound Commitments: Avant-garde Music and the Sixties (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), Arnold Jacobshagen and Markus Leniger, eds., Rebellische Musik: Gesellschaftlicher Protest und kultureller Wandel um 1968 (Cologne: Dohr, 2007), and Beate Kutschke, Neue Linke/Neue Musik:

Kulturtheorien und künstlerische Avantgarde in den 1960er and 70er Jahren
(Cologne: Böhlau, 2007).