

Björn Heile and Charles Wilson, eds.

The Routledge Research Companion to Modernism in Music

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It is quite a task to edit a volume on a topic as evasive as “modernism in music,” and the editors Björn Heile and Charles Wilson have done excellent work with *The Routledge Research Companion to Modernism in Music*. Still frequently discussed and certainly a pertinent concept across musical practices, the editors present the subject as a challenging gamut of perspectives and issues that “seems forever in need of a theory to account for its existence” (p. 3). They neatly indicate the variety of voices gathered in this volume, emphasizing the distinctions between “modernism in music” as “a general cultural and artistic phenomenon,” “modernist music” with “modernist attributes or modernist aspects in music that we may nonetheless balk from classifying as modernist,” and “musical modernism” for all phenomena falling “somewhere between the two terms” (p. 4). A helpful differentiation of the theoretical framework juxtaposes practices referring to the phenomenon with ambivalent meanings and temporal variables (e.g. “recently” or “just now”), as well as a methodological one (as in “modus”). The authors, in short, authoritatively address the concept “in need of a theory to account for its existence” (p. 3).

The volume promises and delivers a solid ground for complementing different issues that lie at the heart of any musical genre-and-style discourses: in this case, the heterogeneous faces of the concept of *modernism*. The historical reference to Virginia Woolf’s essay in the foreword, “Character in Fiction,” and the emphasis on *permutations* and the *social changes* relating to them offer an elegant spin-off thread that stimulates the reader to follow perplexities and ruptures emerging from mainly three epistemologies – aesthetics, ethics and pragmatism. As the editors note, their aim is to focus on “the notion of fundamental [“originary” (p. 7)] break,” “the nature of the historical divide,” and the shift of human character, human sensibility [...] that might have motivated such a break” (p. 6). In this “omnivorous” view of modernism the whole book raises as many questions as it answers. The volume is an enterprise in trips, pilgrimages and outings into different historical, genre-related and phenomenological references.

The book has three sections – Foundations, Positions, Practices – and the twenty contributors offer a rich palette for seeing modernism networked within different historical, aesthetic, psychological and sociological contexts.

Part I, Foundations. James R. Currie's witty contribution "The Birth of Modernism - Out of the Spirit of Comedy" deals with "our increasingly complex understanding of our contemporary moment" (p. 34) and the role of modernist music as a kind of stimulans to cope with the world. Sarah Collins reflects on the temporal and axiological dichotomy of musical modernism in her essay "What Was Contemporary Music? The New, the Modern and the Contemporary in the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM)." Martin Iddon addresses the same issue within the wider sociological and historical perspective in the "Institutions, Artworlds, New Music." In "Modernism and History," David J. Code engages in "the thorny question of modernism's elusive historical origins" (p. 108), while Edward Campbell addresses the aesthetics of modernism in his "Musical Modernity, the Beautiful and the Sublime."

Part II, Positions. In "Reactive Modernism," J. P. E. Harper-Scott soberly points to the key theoretical quandaries of modernity that may be framed as an antinomy between musical poetics and aesthetics, or in his words, "the essential trauma of modernity" (171). Perhaps this essay would fit better into the Positions section, just as is the case with Björn Heile's "Musical Modernism, Global: Comparative Observations." Harper-Scott and Heile, address the *perspectivism on and of* modernity as a reference toward the psychological and geographical entities respectively - both issues announced as pivotal in the foreword. Eva Moreda Rodriguez, in her essay "Musical Modernism and Exile: Cliché as Hermeneutic Tool" offers a striking account on the rhetorics of "both complex, multifarious phenomena" (p. 199), while Robert Adlington (in "Modernism: The People's Music?") provocatively addresses the narrative on modernism as a story "within which the motifs of uncompromising leadership and dedicated service intermingle, sometimes to the point of uncomfortable contradiction" (p. 216). Stephen Graham continues the story in his "Modernism for and of the Masses? On Popular Modernisms." By contrast, Charles Wilson's "Times Like the Present: De-limiting Music in the Twenty-First Century" is better suited for the *Foundations* section, since his emphases on the *limits, access, medium, location, and subjectivity* after all constitute the genetics, as it were, of modernity. M. J. Grant's versatile picture of "The Composer as Communication Theorist" is a well-informed view of a musical species that is undergoing a thorough metamorphosis today, which is a rather nice complement to Trent Leipert's "How Does Modernist Music Make You Feel? Between Subjectivity and Affect."

Part III, Practices. As the title of this chapter suggests, case studies are the primary concern here. Alastair Williams offers a thought-engaging essay regarding one of the main premises of modernism in his "Between Modernism and Postmodernism: Structure and Expression in John Adams, Kaija Saariaho and Thomas Ades." Although set within the case studies chapter, Arnold Whittall's "Foundations and Fixations: Continuities in British Musical Modernism" reaches far above its national context, calls for a comparative volume, or at least an account of ethnically/nationally confined modernisms (or any other "isms"!), as a parallel to places and spaces covered here. Actually, the "The Balinese Moment in the Montreal New Music Scene as a Regional Modernism" by Jonathan Goldman as well as "Vers une écriture liminale: Serialism, spectralism and écriture in the transitional music of Gerard Grisey" by Liam Cagney corespond to the idea of comparative modernisms study. However, Amy Bauer's contribution

“Contemporary Opera and the Failure of Language” as well as “Mark Berry’s “‘Es klang so alt und doch war so neu!': Modernist Operatic Culture through the Prism of Staging ‘Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg)’” move the sociologically oriented focus toward genre-oriented perspective. And it would be so instructive to have also form-related comparative studies of genre-and-style oriented research. As the last contribution, Stefan Knapik’s “The Modernism of the Mainstream: An Early Twentieth-Century Ideology of Violin Playing” opens up an important and up to this point almost overlooked issue on performance. The author points to *vitalism* within performance practice and one could wish to read more about it also with regard to composition, especially within the discourse on modernism that grew up with the idea of *musica viva*.

After reading the introduction and the individual contributions, I was enchanted by the breadth and scope through which musical modernism is represented in this volume. Hats off! At the same time, I feel that musicology today may need to reconsider the economies of how it addresses various phenomena, especially the genre-and-style-related concepts, such as modernism. Since it has a rather rich musicological history, one may well expect, in the age of advanced AI, to find at least some basic referencing to the established research. Although the conceptual analyses in music have aged well, the extensive form of them, as for instance in the *Handwörterbuch der musikalischen Terminologie*, and similar references are tellingly absent from this volume on musical modernism. I certainly understand the confines of such projects and my thoughts are far from nationally motivated. However, just as the *Handwörterbuch der musikalischen Terminologie* did its mission in pattern mining analysis before computers took their role in humanities research, the music *companion* to modernism in music might be more instructive if the past researches are somehow included. At least the digital humanities could aspire to approach modernism in music as one of the “isms”: comparing them critically may bring more understanding of such emergent music phenomena in need of calibration of their meanings with regard to the past and each other.

By the same token, I gladly accept the stance that a “diversity of views is a strength not a weakness” (p. 4) of this volume. The reader could, however, also appreciate some more fact-driven analyses of patterns behind the theoretically attractive views on the modernism in music included in the volume. For instance, the ideas scattered throughout the volume are well organized in the Index. If we search, say, for “modernism, modernism in music” the entries offer a fantastic range of theoretical concepts related to modernism: “and comedy,” “and the contemporary,” “critical concepts,” “definitions” (without mentioning the definitions offered by many other relevant authors), “and exile,” “genealogies,” “global musical modernism,” “‘high’ modernism,” “and history” etc. Yet, geographically speaking, “British musical modernism” seems to be the only systematically researched part of the story. Where are the German, Austrian, the French, the American, the Baltic modernists, to name but a few? They are, of course, included in individual references, yet the historiographical aspects of discussing modernism outside of national and regional contexts are far from clearly elaborated. The fact is that the stories of modernism in music are rather different in each of these geographical and cultural milieus. And they might change the given theoretical framework as well.

This is far from a criticism of the volume. It is a superb endeavor of brilliant, obviously carefully chosen minds. It will help students as well as concert audiences and music educators to reflect better and deeper on the time we live in, musically as well as socially. Moreover, it may help the musicological community to reflect what Nietzsche addressed as reciprocity between history and life, as well as aiding in the search for a methodologically integrative way of approaching musicological concepts. In any case, it is a book worth reading from the foreword to the last chapter.

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