Styles, Conventions, and Issues

The dramatic diversification of new music into a plethora of stylistic regis-isters – each with its own canon and jargon – has been a defining focus of the new music landscape over the past century. 'There is little hope of giving a tidy account of composition in the second fin de siècle', writes Alex Ross. 'Styles of every description – minimalism, post-minimalism, electronic music, laptop music … new experiments in folkloristic music in Latin America, the Far East, Africa, and the Middle East – jostle against one another, none achieving supremacy.'[1] Rather than categorise these musical registers as distinct genres or schools of composition like many of the 'textbook accounts' of twentieth- and twenty-first-century music, we might productively think of the stylistic conventions of composition as flows of influence, where aesthetic and technical ideas travel across international networks to find new situational meaning. In this way of thinking, convention becomes an enabling – rather than taxonomising – device that allows us to articulate the sequence of choices, decisions, responses, and consequences made by composers within the rich circulation of ideas in the global community. The approach taken by authors in the following chapters focuses on the meeting of function and aesthetic at some of the nodes of these stylistic networks, as they make sense of musical operations and approaches embedded within communities of practice. In other words, rather than understanding, say, serialism as a fixed process or ideology in compositional history, it might more helpfully be considered as an amalgamation of local and situated interpretations of serialist ideas and practices (such as the division between tradition and modernity, relationship between freedom and control, etc.).

There are several compositional issues that nuance our understanding of these flows of influence. One is the distinction between new music – in the sense of Paul Bekker's 1919 term *die Neue Musik*[2] – and contemporary music (i.e. music composed at this current moment), which has proved to be a contentious thread. Newness has been a prominent issue for composers seeking to continue the modernist project of suspending or rupturing 'the syntactical and language-like systems of its own tradition' in search of novel

sonic paradigms,[3] and Michael Nyman argues that new music must necessarily involve experimental and conceptual thought and challenge to existing doctrine (e.g. in open forms and indeterminacy). As such, new music is separate from the avant-garde – which must necessarily evoke an aesthetic of radicality[4] – even if both sound unfamiliar or challenging to a listener. With the example of serialism, we find some composers using the technique to rupture traditions in challenge or 'violence' (in Theodor Adorno's description) towards established norms,[5] whilst others were happy to inherit a convention of regulation and patterning that was commonplace, for example, in university communities of the 1960s and 1970s.[6] The distinction between inner musical logic and syntax and sounding artefact is of course only one way to approach this discussion: for example, if a film composer adopts a tonal idiom that does not sound novel to an audience (which of course is contingent on many factors, not least the audience themselves) but is used in innovative multi-modal ways through its interaction with cinematography and narrative. Narratives of technology, the readymade, context and relationality, and the social function of composition are all becoming increasingly important issues in contextualising newness and aesthetic 'value' in contemporary music.

Another central issue for the contemporary music ecosystem is around ways of ordering pitch: whether this be through tonality in various guises (e.g. postmodern quotation, triadic referentiality, 'experimental tonality', and so on), functionality of post-tonality systems (centricity, polarity, tonal space, stability versus instability, voice-leading, etc.), hierarchies and structuring principals 'after' tonality, or microtonality.[7] In the background of new music's relationship with tonality – broadly conceived – is the audience, where there is longstanding debate in the literature between challenging audience expectations by exploring innovative aesthetic areas (often conflated with the notion of autonomous creative depth) and 'appeasing' general sensibilities through the production of content for 'entertainment'. The conflation of public taste into a simplistic binary between a mass audience – implicitly with 'populist' sensibilities – in opposition to a niche and elite 'new music audience' is still surprisingly commonplace in many communities. 'The old prejudices [are] still in place,' says Jörg Widmann. 'When people are enthusiastic, the music must be bad. When ten performances are sold out and the audiences love it . . . [such] a code of conduct continues to hold sway within modern music'.[8] John Pickard suggests that many established composers are still 'traumatized by the serial orthodoxy of the 1960s' and rupture of new music from mainstream commercial music,[9] evidenced by Hans Abrahamsen who points to a sense of relief when first hearing Terry

Riley's *In C* (1964), noting that where tonality might have been considered radical before, works like this opened up a new 'guilt-free' palette.[10] The situation is perhaps more blurred today though, as stylistic extremes are tempered by modern listening habits. Alex Ross observes, 'Schoenberg's scandal-making chords seep into Hollywood thrillers and postwar jazz. . . . Steve Reich's gradual process infiltrates chart-topping albums by the bands Talking Heads and U2. There is no escaping the interconnectedness of musical experience, even if composers try to barricade themselves against the outer world or to control the reception of their work.'[11]

As Ross alludes to, the conventions of contemporary composition need to be understood as assemblages of many things other than style: for example, of history and the negotiation of aesthetic or technical approaches taken by others before us; of politics and geographies with their own territories and geo-social assemblages of values; of local communities and the infrastructures around performing and prompting new music; and of the policy and funding structures of cultural organisations. Flows of 'aesthetic objects, technologies, money, facilities, and ideas'[12] are unpinned by institutions and networks that enact mediation and gatekeeping at multiple levels, from the immediate (commissioners and funders, performers, music conservatories, audiences, etc.) to those further removed from the composer (critics, cultural policy makers, etc.). These institutions might just as likely be formal organisations like the Darmstadt Summer Courses (*Ferienkurse für Internationale Neue Musik Darmstadt*) or The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM) and their associated record labels, publishing houses, and academic journals; semi-formal composer-led cooperatives like Wandelweiser, Bang on a Can, and ListenPony; or informal 'value communities'[13] such as the socio-aesthetic constellation around performances, events, and practices. As a community, we need to be aware that institutions and gatekeepers often demonstrate a propensity towards becoming socially boundaried (i.e. tribal) in their search for legitimacy, likely manifest in exclusionary or 'othering' tactics – as discussed in Georgina Born's account of the reproduction of taste at IRCAM[14] – whether overt or tacit (e.g. in insider-outsider division of notational literacy). Where once these institutions may have been intertwined with currents of artistic innovation that opposed norms and rules, they often solidify into conventional orders over time as their cultural dominance is increasingly asserted.[15] At a time where decolonising and expanding the field of composition is more important than ever, it is vital to ensure the influence of cultural institutions is as visible as possible.[16]

Notes

1. Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise*: *Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 387.
2. Paul Bekker, *Neue Musik* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1923).
3. Mathias Spahlinger, 'this is the time of conceptive ideologues no longer', *Contemporary Music Review*, 27/6 (2008), 580.
4. Michael Nyman, *Experimental Music: Cage and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
5. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Bloomsbury, 2013 [1970]), 27–9.
6. Joseph N. Straus, 'The Myth of Serial "Tyranny" in the 1950s and 1960s', *The Musical Quarterly*, 83/3 (1999), 301–43.
7. See Paul Fleet, *Musics with and after Tonality: Mining the Gap* (Oxford: Routledge, 2021).
8. Quoted in Bálint András Varga (ed.), *The Courage of Composers and the Tyranny of Taste: Reflections on New Music* (New York: University of Rochester Press, 2017), 209.
9. John Pickard, 'Review Article: *On Music* by Robin Holloway', *Tempo*, 59/233 (2005), 63–5.
10. Quoted in Varga, *The Courage of Composers*, 16.
11. Ross, *The Rest Is Noise*, 407.
12. Eduardo Herrera, *Elite Art Worlds: Philanthropy, Latin Americanism, and Avant-Garde Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 9.
13. Georgina Born, 'For a Relational Musicology: Music and Interdisciplinarity, Beyond the Practice Turn', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 135/2 (2010), 218.
14. Georgina Born, *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
15. See *Björn Heile*, '*Darmstadt* as Other: British and American Responses to Musical Modernism', *Twentieth-Century Music*, 1/2 (2004), 161–78; George Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
16. For an extended discussion on this point, see Kate Molleson, *Sound within Sound: A Radical History of Composers in the 20th Century* (London: McClelland & Stewart, 2022).