

## BOOKS

Seth Brodsky, *From 1989, or, European Music and the Modernist Unconscious*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017. £62.95

*From 1989* opens with an anecdote about the author having to choose between performances of Mahler's 8th Symphony (1907) and Nono's *Prometeo* (1981–85), having made an unfortunate double-booking at the *musikfest Berlin 2011*. This decision-making process, and the compelling descriptions of Brodsky's anticipation of both works, inform the approach taken throughout the rest of the book. The impossible choice between Mahler and Nono is revealed as a false dichotomy when viewed from the perspective of the year 1989 where one finds juxtapositions of musical styles, and events that focus on the past, the present, both, or neither. 1989, for Brodsky, characterises the attitude that one can have both Mahler and Nono since they are both equally part of the subconscious heritage of those with an interest in New Music. However, when New Music and Mahler do meet at the *Gustav-Mahler-Fest 1989*, Brodsky describes composers who wrote pieces in response to Mahler's music as approaching it as 'distant, or inoperative, or unrecoverable; or as recoverable but only as a ruin or riddle; or as too close but "like a wall"; or simply impossible to situate at the *right* distance'. (p. 243) Hans Joachim Hespös, one of the composers involved, is translated as calling, in response, for 'someone else NOW'. (p. 246). This unstable relationship between the past and the present is subject to psychoanalytic treatment exploring the relationships between modernism, modernity, music and discourse in and around the year 1989.

The book itself is creatively structured, in three large sections titled 'Free', 'New', and 'Again'. These sections attempt to negotiate modernism as 'fantasy' and modernism as 'analytical', beginning with music and fantasy in the nineteenth century, dealing with modernism as 'a kind of fantasy' (p. 110), and ending with the role of analysis in modernism (in New Music, characterised by figures such as Helmut Lachenmann). These larger sections are split into subsections – 'Drei Phantasiestücke', 'Fantasy & Fantasy', 'Freiheitsdreck', 'Music & New Music', and 'Repetition' – which each appear more than once, and variously in each of the larger sections.

There is an attempt here, then, to offer multiple narratives: one could imagine the reader choosing multiple paths through the book guided by these labels; it's also possible to see this as a further representation of the multiple layers of musical composition, performance and thought explored. Brodsky describes it as, 'an achieved ambivalence' (p. 23).

Indeed, the attempt to embrace rather than to explain complexity is refreshing. New Music, the term preferred for most compositions addressed, is described as not being 'a reliable phrase'. (p. 108) Brodsky attempts to conceive of New Music as a social phenomenon – delineated by types of musical objects and practices – rather than a musical movement or tradition *per se*. In this respect, he explores 'heterotopian networks' around particular composers and concepts (e.g. pp. 163–4), which allow him to bring musical works, styles, and ideas into constellation with each other, following conscious and unconscious influences in time and space. The 'Lyric Suites Network' (Figure 27, pp. 262–3) is the most detailed of these, perhaps explaining the complexity and non-linearity of the situations described in the book best of all.

In bringing together music, history, psychoanalysis, critical theory and 'New Modernist Studies',<sup>1</sup> *From 1989* draws on a vast range of perspectives and sources. In the introduction, the author describes this approach as 'underdisciplined' (p. 4) rather than interdisciplinary. This notes a lack of potential synthesis between these approaches, and after such an admission it is hard to make this a criticism of the book, yet there is still something unsatisfactory in this approach. It isn't, as the author imagines, that there is no sole focus on just one of the ideas referenced in the title, but that ideas often pass by un- or under-examined. Many pieces of music, or critical theorists, are mentioned in passing, and a reader unfamiliar with these may struggle with the text or eventually give up. Comments made about composers and works that have been the subject of musicological investigation are rarely related to other secondary

<sup>1</sup> Douglas Mao, D. and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, 'The New Modernist Studies', 123, no. 3 *PMLA* (2008), pp. 737–48.

texts, therefore isolating the text from these disciplines and contexts. Adorno, for example, is described as ‘purposefully left out’ (p. 254) but is often conspicuous by his absence. The idea of heterotopia, elsewhere most often considered a facet of postmodernity, is automatically conceived as modernist without further explanation. Brodsky’s approach may be new, radical, modernist, or even banal, but all but the most well-informed reader will have no idea which.

Chronologically, modernism is defined in the first part of the book as beginning with the reception of Beethoven’s late quartets (p. 61). This fits the book’s premise that relationships between the ideas discussed are social and psychological, but also underlines the method as one that will not engage with the specifics of music. The history of modernism Brodsky explores is described as ‘the repeated endeavor to engage in such moments [as the ‘shocking enigma’ of late Beethoven]’ (p. 62) or as Rostropovich’s, Hasselhoff’s and Bernstein’s 1989 performances described in the book’s blurb. However, this justifies the inclusion of almost any work, performance or event under the banner of ‘modernism’, with the idea of ‘fantasy’ as their ‘common ground’ (p. 19). There is little differentiation between them as the text quickly moves from one to another. While the fragmented nature of the text is also somewhat explained by this approach, its frequent changes of pace and topic, and overall conversational tone, eventually become off-putting. Specific details are often eluded or lost each time the narrative turns another unexpected corner.

Similarly, the heterotopian networks that are described certainly paint a picture of a complex reality, but on occasions the rationale for what they include and exclude is unclear. In many ways the music, events and theories described in the book appear to be a list of things that caught the attention of the author – related, of course, but in ways that many other conceivable relationships could also be imagined. For example, a reference to a Facebook post by a young composer towards the end of the narrative (p. 260; pp. 267–8) feels particularly uncomfortable in its inclusion after Adorno has been ‘purposefully’ excluded: on the one hand the Facebook post is obviously tangentially related at the very edge of the kind of networks that are explored, but on the other it seems contrived and included merely for its mention of Beckett in relation to New Music.

As an exploration of psychoanalytic ideas in counterpoint with the New Music and events of the late twentieth century, this book will be

of interest to a reader already immersed in both disciplines. It does not provide an historical or musical account of the year of its focus, or the works that it references. As a narrative, it reads as an account of a very personal journey taken by the author among the music and theories that are described. As such, it will likely appeal to a smaller, more specialist, audience than those more generally intrigued by the history and analysis of works of New Music.

Lauren Redhead  
10.1017/S0040298217001103

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Mike Svoboda and Michel Roth, *The Techniques of Trombone Playing*. Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2017. €54

*The Techniques of Trombone Playing* is the most recent (tenth) contribution to the Bärenreiter *Techniques* series written by and for composers and instrumentalists. The co-author team in this case is trombonist Mike Svoboda and composer Michel Roth.

I was pleased to be asked to review this publication, despite being neither a trombonist nor a composer, as, when creating my own resource (for cello<sup>1</sup>), which I began by undertaking a large-scale literature review, it became apparent that there was a lack of critical review across this literature. There does not seem to be a culture of instrumentalists reading books that focus on other instruments; indeed, the authors themselves rarely reference the literature in their publications. This seems at odds with the rise in practitioner-led research, where performers and composers are developing research skills and producing relevant contributions that are expanding the notion of musical research. In addition, a lack of publisher accountability seems evident through incomplete or absent bibliographies and often inconsistent referencing. This means that, despite the proliferation of literature for contemporary instrumental technique since the 1970s, which now numbers around 60 books and several online resources, the quality of the resources themselves varies, and the progression of development has been rather uneven.

The history of this model is interesting, since it constitutes the first resource to describe new techniques to both composers and performers, lying somewhere between an orchestration guide and technical handbook. In addition to this balance between serving composer and

<sup>1</sup> See Ellen Fallowfield, [www.cellomap.com](http://www.cellomap.com).