

REVIEW

Packaging the Recent Past

Music after the Fall: Modern Composition and Culture since 1989, by Tim Rutherford-Johnson, Oakland: University of California Press, 2017, xii + 348 pp., £70.95 (hardback), ISBN: 9780520283145

From 1989 or European Music and the Modernist Unconscious, by Seth Brodsky, Oakland: University of California Press, 2017, xvi + 344 pp., £62.95 (hardback), ISBN: 9780520279360

These books, in terms of numbers of pages, are virtually identical: xvi + 344 (Brodsky); xii + 348 (Rutherford-Johnson). In pre-digital times, they might have been categorized, generically, as at the opposite extreme from a concert review, dictionary article or journal essay. Today, other forms of communication widen the comparative range still further, and also the complications. For example, Rutherford-Johnson's book might be presumed radically different from a typical Rutherford-Johnson blog post,¹ but does an inveterate blogger, prioritizing opinion over information, produce a different, less penetratingly 'critical', kind of book than might have been the case in those pre-digital times?

'Not necessarily' is the only sensible answer to that question, and the differences between these 'virtually identical' books begin with their titles. While Brodsky promises an exclusive focus on 'European music and the modernist unconscious', Rutherford-Johnson announces no such restrictions. Since the whole of 'modern composition and culture since 1989' is involved he chooses a short series of topics for seven chapters that embody what interests him most, and doesn't spend time explaining why some active, prominent composers (Gerald Barry, Harrison Birtwistle) do not feature more prominently, even when they fit the chosen topics as well as if not better than those he does include. Maybe there have been blog posts by Rutherford-Johnson that make it clearer what his personal tastes are, when the requirements of authoritative comprehensiveness and steadily unfolding arguments are not involved. In any case, 'authoritative comprehensiveness and steadily unfolding arguments' might be deemed less desirable – even actually impossible – when most if not all the material under discussion is too recent (relatively speaking) to have been absorbed into or decisively excluded from a canonic continuum.

Does this pair of volumes mark the beginning of authentically authoritative book-length history-writing about (mainly) serious music since 1989? If so, they might be helping to bring a distinctively twenty-first-century flavour to the genre, 12 years on from 2005. The publication in that year of all six volumes of Richard Taruskin's *Oxford History of Western Music* encouraged music historians to agree that 2005 was when the long twentieth century actually ended. Here was the grandest imaginable terminus for an overview of Western music history entire, using the permanency of print (just four years after that ultimate print exercise, the 29 volumes of *The New Grove*, second edition). And Taruskin came commendably close to the present – the last composition discussed was John Adams's *El Niño*, premiered in December 2000, a work easily understood as affirming the twentieth century's recreative virtuosity, imaginatively rethinking rather than simplistically rejecting the musical past. But Taruskin himself was careful to avoid triumphalist cadencing. His last two sentences are: 'The future is anyone's guess. Our story ends, as it must, in the middle of things.'

'In the middle of things' is not inappropriate as an alternative title to the books by Rutherford-Johnson and Brodsky. Even if there really was a long twentieth century that ran on to 2005, the long twenty-first century could be said to have begun, as 'history', in 1989, with non-musical events – the fall of the Berlin Wall and the associated demise of Soviet-style Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. As their full titles spell out, neither Rutherford-Johnson nor Brodsky attempt to argue that the significance of 1989 as a pivot for their narratives is, to coin a phrase, 'purely musical'. Something subtitled 'Modern Composition and Culture since 1989' is clearly going to be more comprehensive geographically than something subtitled 'European Music and the Modernist Unconscious': but – accepting for the sake of argument that 'composition' (Rutherford-Johnson) and 'music' (Brodsky) are sort-of synonyms – it is evident that 'culture' and 'the modernist unconscious', as phenomena apart from musical compositions, are being expected to provide relevant contexts for those purely musical materials. Even more basically, 'from' or 'since' 1989 signals that this year was special in initiating something that – nearly 20 years on – seems to be significantly different from what went before, even if not providing a neat division between 'late modernism' (up to 1989) and 'postmodernism' (after 1989).

For Rutherford-Johnson, as his back-cover blurb spells out, the emergence of 'the post-Cold War era' involves a 'changed backdrop [...] of globalization, digitisation, and new media', a new culture to match the new politics and the new technologies. Rutherford-Johnson's sub-title prompts one immediate question: to what extent does what has been 'modern' – 'new' – since 1989 involve rejecting or continuing existing modernist strategies? This is where Brodsky's preliminary formulation is distinctive, in what his blurb proclaims an 'unorthodox Lacanian account of European New Music. [...] As [from 1989] world politics witnesses a turning away from the possibility of revolution, musical modernism revolves in place, performing century-old tasks of losing, failing, and beginning again, in preparation for a revolution to come.' It is safe to say that nothing in Rutherford-Johnson's terminology, as deployed across his narrative, appears to dispute this suggestion that a modernism dominant before 1989 has remained prominent, and even possibly no less dominant, since 1989. If so, the 'post-Cold War era' (which at the time of writing looks like being replaced by 'Cold War II') might have more in common with pre-1989 eras reaching back (at least) to Napoleonic times than might have once been hoped.

Emerging from the same publisher at roughly the same time, these books could scarcely avoid degrees of overlap in respect of the composers and compositions discussed. Nevertheless, it is the differences that remain in the mind, with Rutherford-Johnson the European insider scanning the whole wide world in relatively sober, downbeat style, while Brodsky is the American outsider zooming in on a Berlin-centred Europe – its music, philosophy and psychoanalytic theory – with inexhaustible exuberance and (occasionally) show-stopping rhetoric. Recalling a televised talk about Mahler's Ninth, Brodsky skewers Leonard Bernstein: 'swaddled in endless undoubt at the power of his own words, he becomes a surrogate music father on whose knee we hear of Papa Music's demise' (250); and when it comes to musical detail, Brodsky is never less than virtuosic in conveying maximum authority on a huge range of complex and often difficult-to-access material. While creating no expectations of gazetteer-like comprehensiveness, Brodsky links detailed technical accounts of compositional contexts to his wider topics concerning modernism and the unconscious. Rutherford-Johnson – while steering commendably clear of blog-style glibness – is more the ever-curious documentary observer of the contemporary scene, with emphasis on experimental and club-like enterprises, what he calls 'specific situations' (128), describing rather than discriminating; as noted earlier, he gives us no clues as to what if any music he has avoided or disliked, leaving the reader unsure whether the exclusion of various high-profile composers serves an agenda or not.

Further important differences between the pair are clear from the musical materials which launch their books. While Brodsky chooses three Berlin-based events from November/

December 1989 – Bernstein’s “‘Freiheit’ instead of “‘Freude’” performance of Beethoven’s Ninth, Rostropovich playing Bach at the Wall, and (with a drastic shift of aesthetic levels) David Hasselhoff appropriating the pop song ‘Looking for Freedom’, Rutherford-Johnson chooses five products from the years 1988–90 which are less geographically specific but no less well-contrasted: *Different Trains* by Steve Reich; Piano Sonata No. 6 by Galina Ustvolskaya; *Kits Beach Soundwalk* by Hildegard Westerkamp; ‘Brain Forest—for Acoustic Metal Concrete’ from the album *Cloud Cock OO Grand* by Merzbow; and *H’un (Lacerations)* by Bright Sheng. From this, one deduces that if Rutherford-Johnson’s ‘modern’ involves straightforward assumptions about (relative) recentness and/or radicalism, Brodsky’s ‘modernism’ is more about particular events in place and time, and the meanings extractable from those events, than it is about the precise technical nature of any musical materials that might be in use; it matters more that the events are recent than that the music is – although (the first of many necessary qualifications) Brodsky spends much of his time in the book on how recent modernist music involves itself with confrontations between old, and often tonal, music and what recent composers have recently done with it – a mode of procedure which, as Brodsky’s final detailed discussion reveals, was a significant feature of a composition seen as foundational to twentieth-century modernism – Schoenberg’s *Erwartung*, written 80 years before 1989.

For both authors, Berio’s *Rendering* (1989–90) is a key instance of what Brodsky calls a ‘heterotopian countercontext, intervening in – and occasionally sabotaging – a dominant musical-cultural fantasy that grips a particular historical moment’ (147); while for Rutherford-Johnson, avoiding such philosophical or psychoanalytic resonances, ‘Schubert’s glimpses of a new, nineteenth-century symphonism are repurposed as commentary on late-twentieth century fragmentation and decay and the impossibility of true restoration’ (249). There is no radical difference between how the two authors think of ‘modernism’, as opposed to ‘classicism’: ‘where modernism is, there ambivalence will be, and also uncertainty’, as Brodsky puts it (23). But a certain disparity emerges in the contrast between the ‘classical’ order of Rutherford-Johnson’s account and Brodsky’s much less centripetal – even heterotopian – approach: and here those ‘philosophical or psychoanalytic resonances’, like parapraxis, basic to Brodsky come to the fore.

As ‘the faulty performance of an intended action’, parapraxis is a psychoanalytical term that, in a musicological and modernist context, acquires a ludic aura. In his final sentences, Brodsky offers a clinchingly polarized and paradoxical definition of modernism as ‘a tradition of remembering oblivion, a ceaseless re-reception of what was never there in the first place’ (268). Those of us doing the ‘re-reception’ are in the grip of the Beckettian impulse to ‘fail better’ – especially if we can see sense in the proposition that ‘modernism would be an enjoyment of a modernity it does not have and cannot “have” – an enjoyment precisely of modernity’s failure to appear. Here modernity becomes a kind of eternal parapraxis, an act “whose explicit goal is [never] attained”’ (125: Brodsky is quoting a definition by Jean Laplace and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis from 1974).

This fits neatly enough with Brodsky’s early statement of his intent to tell ‘a story of non-origins, botched genesis, missed encounters’ as part of ‘the larger missed encounter between modernism and revolution – modernism’s “failure” to execute a temporal revolution it is always auguring, and its correspondent “success” as a repeated turning in place, a constant coming back to where it started’. His book aims ‘to train its gaze on what continues to fail to happen, to *not* make itself into sensual immediacy, to fall short of a present otherwise deliriously devoted to picturing itself “in the moment”’. It is in this sense, he claims, that ‘aesthetic modernism is here to stay [...] as a misrecognized and unconscious repetition of acts “whose explicit goal is not attained”’. (13). Even readers convinced that the essence of modernism is *not* genuine revolution can learn much from the Brodsky slant, not least its sense that one of

modernism's possible failures has been not to take 'revolution' seriously enough: in my terms, not to be avant-garde instead.

Modernism in art is technique – 'inconsistency: a de-partitioning and un-gridding of worlds, a de-regulation of differential coordinates' (4): it is, in one of Brodsky's simpler formulations, 'anything but consistent' (5), and innumerable chroniclers of the phenomenon have been content with unravelling the technical consequences of such an impeccably and unambiguously anti-classical yet un-revolutionary instinct. In this sense, modernist works do not so much fail to attain explicit goals as bring the concept of 'goal', closure as completion, into question, subject to suspension. But Brodsky has much larger targets in view, using psychoanalytic concepts to contextualize how modernism can be equated with forms of negation, loss, even mourning, as when he speaks of modernist music 'making tonality go missing' (10). Brodsky also dramatizes such mechanisms as paradoxical swerves – 'tonality returns *as* dodecaphony, or integral serialism, or spectralism' (10) – without (unless I've failed to spot it) attempting to clarify the theoretical principles that might make such assertions technically plausible or musically enjoyable. The problem with claiming, in 'responding to the last few decades' literature on aesthetic modernism', that 'modernism is a kind of fantasy, or, rather, that fantasy provides it an unconscious consistency, one that covers for the failures it invariably encounters in the public sphere, where its struggle to hegemonize the discourse always falls short' (110) is that such grandly general responses can do little more than reinforce modernism's alleged shortcomings by seeking to extend the discourse indefinitely. Otherwise, one risks having to fall back on a narrative outlining modernism's actual 'successes' – the creation of memorable musical compositions.

If 'the history of aesthetic modernism can be understood in part as a constant, tense passage' between what Lacan defined as a 'master's discourse' and an 'analyst's discourse', (21) it is far from clear why one can find 'in failure as an axiom a felicitous – and achieved – encounter' (17): or how, technically, Berio's *Rendering* embodies an 'encounter' with Schubert that 'fails'. Rather, I would suggest that Berio is not 'remembering oblivion', but celebrating difference, convergence rather than collision, balancing incompatibilities. But despite occasional, useful analytical excursions to explore those 'technical consequences' in particular compositions, Brodsky cannot resist moving from the 'what' to the 'why', not merely of modernist music, but of the 'modernist unconscious', which encourages flights of fancy.

Modernism only emerged, and seemingly could only emerge, within cultures that already knew their New, and already possessed extraordinarily sophisticated know-how *for* it, enjoying, desiring, and fantasizing it in multiple forms. I want to suggest that modernism emerged, initially but repeatedly, as the disruption, and often the sabotage, of precisely this know-how, this desire and enjoyment, these fantasies – a New with no know-how. (9)

If you can follow, and appreciate, the conclusion from this that 'modernism could also be conceived as an unconscious commitment to modernity, whose impossible character, now repressed, is thus secretly enjoyed' (127), there is probably a fair chance of your accepting that Brodsky's wider, vaguer themes serve to complement and not simply interrupt the concrete musical narratives that best demonstrate his strengths as a well-informed and voraciously curious consumer of music since well before 1989. Meanwhile, some of the more mundane aspects of critical terminology and compositional context that continue to fascinate as 1989 recedes in time and space merit further consideration, with reference to one of Brodsky's and Rutherford-Johnson's principal composers.

For his Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard University, delivered in 1993/4 and eventually published in 2006 (Harvard University Press), Luciano Berio chose the neatly paradoxical title 'Remembering the Future', perhaps with the aim of suggesting that, if this is literally

impossible, so is the opposite, ‘forgetting the past’. Berio talks a good deal about remembering in the context of translation and transcription, stating that

my transcriptions are invariably prompted by analytical considerations. I have always thought that the best possible commentary on a symphony is another symphony, and I reckon that the third part of my *Sinfonia* is the best and deepest analysis that I could have hoped to make of the Scherzo from Mahler’s Second Symphony. The same is true of my *Rendering* for orchestra [1988–9], which is my own act of love for Schubert and for his sketches for his last unfinished symphony in D major (D936A), which occupied him during the final weeks of his life. (40–1)

Non-composing music theorists wishing to challenge these disarming claims might counter that the ‘best possible commentary’ on Beethoven’s ‘Eroica’ Symphony is not ‘another symphony’, but Schenker’s graph-supported essay ‘Beethoven’s Third Symphony: its True Content described for the First Time’ (*The Masterwork in Music. Vol. III (1930)*, ed. William Drabkin, trans. Derrick Puffett and Alfred Clayton, Cambridge University Press, 1997). Schenker’s work is evidently an analysis of the whole ‘Eroica’ and not ‘another symphony’. In which case, Berio is not producing ‘analyses’ of Schubert and Mahler, but new compositions in which material by these (and other) composers serve his proper aesthetic purposes, purposes suitably distant from those relevant to academic instruction and illumination. That *Rendering* – a synonym for transcription as well as performance – is discussed by both Brodsky and Rutherford-Johnson confirms its status as an exemplary late-twentieth century, late modernist demonstration of the possible appeal of not seeking to make ‘old’ and ‘new’ fold effortlessly into each other. As David Osmond-Smith succinctly noted:

Rather than attempt to fill out the fragmentary sketches that Schubert left for his Tenth Symphony, Berio treats them rather as one might a damaged fresco, and fills the gaps with material that makes no attempt at completion (although it, too, is derived from Schubert, notably the last piano sonata and the ‘Wanderer’ Fantasy), and announces its alien nature by the non-Schubertian sound of the celesta. (*Berio*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, 89)

The presence of the ‘non-Schubertian’ alongside the real thing, the juxtaposition of the ‘alien’ and the non-alien, seems authentically modernist, anti-classical, in a productively pluralist fashion, so that the ‘old’ can be sensed to impinge on the ‘new’ to enrich as well as to destabilize the constituent elements present. Berio’s ‘analysis’ might amount to nothing more than a representation in sound of difference between old and new; his composition, *Rendering*, can indeed be analysed but it is not – praise be! – an analysis: and as a composition exemplifying modernist aesthetics it presents all those particular challenges to technical and theoretical description that have confronted commentators since such early classics of the genre as Stravinsky’s *Pulcinella* and Berg’s Violin Concerto.

In a recent essay Peter J. Schmelz contrasts Alfred Schnittke’s claim that in his Violin Concerto No. 3 (1978) ‘I tried to construct a unified system of intonations linking the two sound worlds – the tonal and the atonal – organically’, so that ‘atonality can be reached from any point in tonality (and vice versa’, with the judgement that, in practice, Schnittke ‘sought an equilibrium between many opposed qualities within his music’, and ‘needless to say, he never achieved a satisfactory result’. Clearly, Schnittke the composer/commentator is dramatizing the tensions he senses between alternatives described simply as opposite extremes: ‘tonal’ as purely diatonic, essentially, connectedly consonant, ‘atonal’ as totally chromatic, fragmentedly dissonant, and each embroiled in a further projection of processes content to embody ‘an equilibrium between many opposed qualities’ rather than their harmonious, unified, organically integrated synthesis (see Peter J. Schmelz, ‘Tonality after “New Tonality”’: Silvestrov, Schnittke, and Polystylism in the Late USSR’ in *Tonality Since 1950* ed. Felix Wörner, Ullrich Scheideler and Philip Rupprecht (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2017, 236–9).

In a culture where the appeal of multiplicity, if not of revolution, has impacted even on the analysis of tonal composition (see Steven Rings, *Tonality and Transformation*, New York: Oxford University Press 2011, 222), pluralist approaches to post-tonal music are only to be expected, and with them an inevitable multiplicity of technical terms for ‘governing’ concepts that need to resist rather than reinforce a monolithic, all-controlling and all-connecting strategy. There might have been a brief period around the middle of the twentieth century when meaningful opposition between ‘tonal’ and ‘atonal’ could be equated with neo-classicism or neo-romanticism on the one hand and the integrally serial avant-garde on the other. But such stark compartmentalization could not survive for long. In an admirable account Eric Drott has used Kaja Saariaho’s heady comment, from the mid-1980s, that

just as the universe of Newton is contained within the universe of Einstein, contemporary music can similarly contain, in addition to other elements, all the developed knowledge of our civilization, as well as the knowledge that we have been able to acquire about other civilizations

to introduce his own conclusions about the consequences of a situation in which ‘disavowal of tonality did not result in its absolute erasure, but in a lingering attachment reminiscent of the psychic retention of “lost objects” that Freud placed at the center of his theory of object formation’.

Drott makes particularly creative use of the ‘post’ prefix – as in ‘post-serialism’, ‘post-spectralism’ – to signify ‘after’, not as ‘subsequent to’ or ‘rejecting’, but as ‘affected by’. A musical world in which ‘consonance, periodicity, polarities of tension and release, directed harmonic motion – these and other features suppressed because of their association with tonality, could safely be reintegrated into contemporary composition’ (Eric Drott, ‘Saariaho, Timbre, and Tonality’, in *Tonality Since 1950*, 263). Yet even this apparently unexceptionable comment about a shift from absence back to presence in later twentieth-century compositional thinking risks screening out the persistent evidence for the kind of ambivalent persistence of tonal presences that become meaningful when the concept of suspension supplants that of suppression.

Earlier I listed the five compositions chosen by Tim Rutherford-Johnson to exemplify the character and diversity of ‘music after the fall’. One of his early moves is to suggest that the five ‘might all be described in relation to trauma’ (10), and he elaborates the point in acknowledging that, while Merzbow’s *Cloud Cock OO Grand*

does not thematize trauma in the same way as the other pieces do [...] [n]evertheless, the experience of listening to the music, in its harshness, its disorienting, dizzying formlessness, and the aggression of its surrounding discourse, at least imitates trauma, if only to sublimate or to subvert it. This shared ground may suggest a connecting force. Trauma is certainly a common theme in contemporary art and has grown particularly in response to the increased presence of groups in mainstream culture that had hitherto been marginalized (and hence traumatized) on the basis of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or class. [...] With all of this in mind, I suggest that the main developments of the last twenty-five years that might enable or inspire the stylistic development of new music are social liberalization, globalization, digitization, the Internet, late capitalist economics and the green movement. There may be others [...] but these six provide a useful set of vectors along which much of the musical activity of the last twenty-five years, to say nothing of the wider cultural and political landscape, might be understood. (11)

Rutherford-Johnson is no less concerned to emphasize that ‘our instinct in the face of loss’ – his immediate context here is the musical response to 9/11 – ‘is increasingly becoming to commemorate through documentation. Handheld recording devices that capture images, video, and sound and server farms that make it easy to store the resulting files have given us an unprecedented ability to preserve our experiences’, and ‘our views have become so habitually mediated anyway that the ontological distance between a recording of an occasion and our

memory of it does not trouble us. Documentation has become a sign of authenticity: we believe in the “authenticity” of the recording, although in truth there is no such thing’ (223). Rutherford-Johnson’s concern to highlight change in and after 1989 is no less transparent in his appropriation of Zygmunt Bauman’s ‘central thesis [. . .] that individuals in late modern society are no longer tied to a single ongoing identity’, rather there is a ‘movement between identities’ Bauman calls “liquid life” or “liquid modernity” (94–5), something connected in turn with Nicolas Bourriaud’s “radicant aesthetic”, an ‘idea of rootlessness, or of being in motion’ (95). Despite such grand theoretical designs, however, specific musical works reinforce the apparent alternatives persisting within the on-going late modernist era. Even the five well-varied composers and compositions from which Rutherford-Johnson launches his study have some solid, sustained, recurrent elements to balance their radical fluidity.

Elliott Carter (1908–2012) is mentioned only in passing by Rutherford-Johnson and not at all by Brodsky. The fact that he remained productive and lauded until well after 1989 may count for less in 2018 than his embodiment of the kind of wholehearted elitism expressed in his statement, dating from the early 1960s, that ‘serious music appeals to a longer span of attention and to a more highly developed auditory memory than do the more popular kinds of music. In making this appeal it uses many contrasts, coherence and contexts that give it a wide scope of expression, great emotional power and variety, direction, uniqueness, and a fascination of design with many shadings and qualities far beyond the range of popular or folk music’ (Carter’s essay ‘Shop Talk by an American Composer’ was first published in *Musical Quarterly* in 1960. It is reprinted in Elliott Carter, *Collected Essays and Lectures 1937–1995*, ed. Jonathan W. Bernard, University of Rochester Press, 1997, 214–24). Since I used these remarks in the 1970s when making the case for the exclusion of ‘popular or folk music’ from my book *Music since the First World War* I was confessing to an attitude (‘serious music is not just different, but better’) stigmatized by Dai Griffiths a few years later as ‘grammar schoolboy music’, and as characteristic of at least some musicians born before 1950 as cultural anti-elitism has been to those born since (see *Music, Culture, and Society. A Reader*, ed. Derek B. Scott, Oxford University Press, 2000, 143–5). It seems idle to deny that the technological developments affecting the creation and dissemination of music and all other forms of communication over the past century and more have marginalized the institutional foundations of ‘serious music’ as Carter defined it, in the dying years of the pre-digital era before accessibility became instant and the possibility of immediate communication turned into an addictive necessity.

The obvious contrast between music appealing ‘to a longer span of attention and to a more highly developed aural memory’ and other kinds of music predicated on other communicative media is something any author aspiring to range comprehensively over contemporary composition needs to take in their stride, and it suits Rutherford-Johnson’s aims – producing a book alongside his various blogging enterprises – even more precisely than Brodsky’s more specifically ‘academic’ ambitions. Similarly, Brodsky’s ‘critical apparatus’ – more than 50 pages of densely detailed end-notes, but no separate bibliography or guide to recordings – complements Rutherford-Johnson’s more economical end-notes (just 21 pages), supplemented by appendices of ‘recommended listening’ and ‘further reading’. Neither have dedicated websites with further materials, after the pattern of (in particular) some of OUP’s music books. But both provide absorbing demonstrations of the perils and pleasures of history-writing as high-wire act – juggling the need to generalize in tandem with the no less urgent need to be specific.

At one point, observing ‘the use of excess as a deliberate challenge to the validity of unity’, Rutherford-Johnson instances the ‘multivalency’ of Michael Finnissy’s *Folklore* (1993–4) as ‘at some level at least, a symptom of the disunified global reality that it seeks to reflect’ (197). This is held to contrast with using ‘the ideals of a unified musical language to aspire instead to a picture of cultural homogeneity and harmony’, as with ‘Stockhausen’s extension in *LICHT*

of the serial method into every aspect of the work' (198). The simple attempt to document the essence of so many elaborate musical constructs in this way – and readers can indulge in a salutary comparative exercise in closely reading how differently Brodsky and Rutherford-Johnson deal with such major works of the period as Berio's *Rendering* and Nono's *La lontananza nostalgica utopica futura* – cannot *not* reinforce the gulf between the imaginative sonic flights of the composer and the verbal constraints of the interpreting critic/commentator. Neither of these authors could have confined their analyses to the materials they initially selected as significantly representative and retained credibility as chroniclers of a period rather than a 'moment'. Moments, however meticulously and microscopically analysed, remain too open-ended: only if they can be shown to stand for something beyond themselves can they be brought into a suitably grand narrative. Between 'the disunified global reality' and 'a picture of cultural homogeneity and harmony' commentators wishing to do justice to both are well advised to embrace the unstable rigours of 'liquid life', ever hopeful that their labours will attract the passing attention of listeners, thinkers and even, occasionally, composers, who can understand, up to a point, the particular contemporary cultural-historical challenges writers like Brodsky and Rutherford-Johnson aspire to confront.

Note

1. Rutherford-Johnson's blog is called *The Rambler: Modern Composition. Blogging the Music that Others Won't Tell you About* (<https://johnsonsrambler.wordpress.com>).

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/14723808.2017.1359399>