

Preface

In the year I was an MPhil composition student, there were two of us working with Robin Holloway: me and another young British composer, Benjamin Harris. Ben wrote elegant, beautifully crafted music, in which he worked hard – and always successfully – to fuse a strict usage of the twelve-tone method with the sonic language of an essential English tradition, epitomised by his namesake, Britten. Thinking of myself, at the time, as a loyal, orthodox student of the post-minimal composer, Steve Martland – with whom I had been studying privately since the beginning of my undergraduate studies – I regularly pestered Ben to justify the necessity, or value, of the strict approach he took to dodecaphony. At the same time, in my own music, I was making use of rhythmic devices I had borrowed (if also misunderstood) from Brian Ferneyhough, introduced to me by Fabrice Fitch, himself a Ferneyhough student. These involved the systematic use of number series to create both metrical structures and the rhythmic frames which filled them. Pitch was determined, and later added, by a separate process, which involved rotations – if memory serves – of Messiaen's modes of limited transposition. On one occasion, I outlined these systems and devices to Ben as a way, I imagined, of showing precisely why I thought his reliance on a Schoenbergian method unnecessary. Ben's response to my parametric approach to material was inevitable: 'Why!' he exclaimed, 'You're more of a serialist than I am!'

If, as Sebastian Wedler says in his contribution to this volume, the image of Webern which emerges in the reception history seems like the hydra, serialism writ large feels chimerical. Defining it involves fusing together elements which could not – indeed *cannot* – co-exist (and nonetheless *do*). But, more, it sometimes seems to take on the quality of myth: no shortage of composers figured their practices in opposition to the 'strictness' of a serial method, yet pinning down more than a handful of pieces which pursue such dogmatic adherence to serial 'rules' is a challenge. If anything, what emerges here is surely the individual quality (and qualities) of the approaches taken with respect to a centre which could never have been expected to hold, not least because it is not, and perhaps never was, a single thing.

As Catherine Nolan and Marcus Zagorski note in the first two chapters in the present volume – on a theme which runs throughout the text in many different configurations – serialism has been taken to be a synonym for dodecaphony, of the twelve-tone method, where the twelve-tone row is figured *as a series*; it has been taken to indicate an *extension* of dodecaphony, such that twelve-element series of musical parameters other than pitch are treated in analogous ways, alongside pitch; it has been taken to define a ‘multiple’ serialism, wherein independent musical parameters are treated systematically in some way *before* their (re)combination, even where none of those parameters are divided up into groups of twelve; it has been taken to indicate a sort of general mode of thought which might proceed from and encompass *all* of the above, but also modes of composing which, though interested in the separability and independence of parameter, are less concerned – if concerned at all – with the necessity for systematic or rigorous treatment of those parameters. In this last case, such definitions begin to bleed into what Adorno described as *musique informelle* or post-serialism, categories themselves less neatly dissociable from serialism than the privative ‘post-’ of the latter category might suggest, as Charles Wilson argues. Indeed, as Jennifer Iverson proposes, this sort of more expansive terrain might afford productive readings of musics which exhibit apparently serial characteristics even if in much less familiar territory – in sampling, in EDM, in hip hop – in ways which surely reveal the instability at the heart of any singular, totalising attempt to pin serialism down.

In similar vein, though the text contains detailed examinations of the composers surely most readily recognised as having been the past century’s leading composers of serial music – Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg, Anton Webern, Milton Babbitt, Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Luigi Nono, and Igor Stravinsky – as well as its familiar geographical heartlands of Western Europe and North America, it seeks to press beyond this, insisting on serialism as a *performed* music and showing the vibrancy of approaches to serialism in Eastern Europe, Russia, Latin America, and East Asia. This, too, figures the ways in which serialism ceased to be the property of a small coterie of expert composers, notwithstanding the brilliance of their respective contributions, and became part of a much more diverse musical conversation, in terms of activity, geography, ethnicity, and gender alike.

With this more expansive, increasingly global view, it becomes clear that for every occasion serialism has been decried as a sort of restrictive artistic straitjacket, there is another where it has acted as a totemic expression of

apparently unlimited artistic freedom. Although on one, ultimately globally northern, view serialism seems like a historical trend – so bound up with the needs and compulsions of the twentieth century that it can be, at best, a potent mirror for the contemporary world – this broader one suggests that there may, yet, be new statements to be made with and through it.

The preparation of this volume took place, in large part, against the backdrop of the pandemic, and its development was, perhaps unsurprisingly, significantly slower than it might otherwise have been as a result. I owe an enormous debt of thanks to all of the contributors for their good humour and mutual understanding of the various challenges faced by us as a body of scholars during this period. Sam Ridout's help in ensuring editorial consistency across the text was immeasurably valuable. I am grateful, too, to Kate Brett and her team at Cambridge University Press for their support and faith in the project from start to finish.

In mind of the brief anecdote above, which I have had often in my mind in working on the contributions to this volume, I would like to dedicate it to three formative figures: to the memory of Steve Martland, because I think it would have made him laugh to figure in any guise in a volume dedicated to serialism; to Robin Holloway, in gratitude for challenging, inspiring conversations about *Lulu* and why it *sounds* the way it does; and to Fabrice Fitch, who thought I might have some promise, probably before anyone else did, and was kind enough to tell me so.

