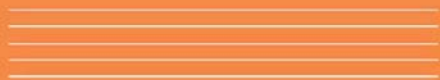


Paul Griffiths

MODERN MUSIC AND AFTER

3rd edition



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Modern Music and After

Paul Griffiths

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Prelude

This is not a history of music since 1945. It is not even a history of Western classical music—to use two epithets as loaded as they are slippery—since 1945. It is, rather, an account of a musical movement that gained huge momentum after 1945 (though of course its origins went back further): a movement of radical renewal. To the composers of the immediate postwar years, music seemed to have stalled. The great innovations of a generation before—those of *The Rite of Spring*, of Schoenberg's early atonal works, of Debussy's perpetual flux, of Varèse's rampant percussion, of Ives's polyphony of styles—had not been followed up. They had also been largely ignored by the world of musical performance. Modernism was always concerned with both these things, with maintaining music's progress and with installing progressive music within the general repertory.

Now, more than sixty years later, it would be easy to conclude that the first of these tasks has been taken to the limit (if the second has barely been begun), and the structure of this book reflects an uncertainty within the modernist project since the 1970s. Yet as long as musical society largely ignores the changes (and the nonchanges) that human mentality has accommodated or striven to accommodate in recent decades—the shifts and stabilities explored in the music under discussion—the 'after' in this book's title is only a prospect and modern music remains unfinished.

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1945

No other date has left such a mark. The capitulation of Germany in early May and of Japan in the summer brought the Second World War to an end, and seems to have closed the era of massive combat by which empires exerted their supremacy. However, these events were accompanied by others whose effects have not ended or even been diminished. The liberation of Nazi concentration camps revealed that murder and suffering on an immense scale could be perpetrated at the hands of quite ordinary people; the dropping of the first atomic bombs showed that these minor agents were no longer necessary. People who survived the war, and who came after, have had to live with a darker awareness of what is humanly possible.

It can be no surprise that 1945 represents a shift in music. The destruction, havoc, grief, and misery felt across the world—and the widespread hopes for a new social order, and therefore a new culture—demanded not just reconstruction but an alternative paradigm. Among composers, few were not moved to make a fresh start, as we can see in the cases of Igor Stravinsky, Olivier Messiaen, Elliott Carter, and many others. The instigators of change, though, were not these mature figures but the young: people just coming to adulthood in a shattered world.

To the extent that this shattered or disordered world is still recognizably our own, a world of lost certainties and uncertain gains, so is its music—what we still, two-thirds of a century later, want to call ‘modern music’, because it feels as new now as it did then, and because everything that has happened in music since hinges, whether in extension or retraction, on that post-1945 moment.

I

Rational and Irrational

Western Europe, 1945–50

Paris, 1945–48

Nothing is ever quite new. Efforts to remake music after 1945 always appealed to the renewal of earlier in the century; indeed, the new phase was regularly justified as continuing what had been started at that time and left in abeyance for two decades. Similarly, nothing is ever totally localized. New beginnings soon after 1945 can be traced in the United States, Japan, central Europe, and other regions. Nevertheless, Paris in the immediate postwar years was an unusually active focus of innovation.

Though musical life had continued during the German occupation, the ending of the war was an incentive to breathe again, and then to change the world. In Paris, as throughout the previous Nazi empire, liberation made it possible to perform, discuss, and hear music that had been banned for being adventurous or Jewish or, to take the prominent case of Schoenberg, both. The moment, then, was right. And there were the right people to take possession of the moment. Olivier Messiaen (1908–92) during these years was composing his largest and most elaborate work so far, the *Turangalila* symphony, a composition to crown his earlier achievements and at the same time display new concerns he shared with the young students who had gathered around him at the Paris Conservatoire. Pierre Boulez (b. 1925), the most gifted of them, was taking off from Messiaen and Schoenberg in a bold new direction, and Pierre Schaeffer (1910–95), in the studios of Radiodiffusion-

Télévision Française, was working towards the first examples of musique concrète, music made by transforming recorded sounds and composed not onto paper but onto the heavy black discs of the contemporary gramophone.

The Young Boulez

Scattered across Europe in 1945 were students who, though unaware of each other, shared many of the same convictions. Hans Werner Henze (b. 1926), in Heidelberg, was rapidly assimilating music that had been proscribed since his early childhood: Schoenberg, Berg, Stravinsky, and jazz. In Budapest and Milan, György Ligeti (1923–2006) and Luciano Berio (1925–2003) were beginning to explore new avenues. At the same time, in the United States, slightly older composers—Elliott Carter (b. 1908), John Cage (1912–92), Conlon Nancarrow (1912–97), Milton Babbitt (b. 1916)—were starting afresh. Of course, this is the view of hindsight. Nancarrow's work was almost unknown until the 1970s, which is when Ligeti and Berio began to publish their early compositions. But in the quasi-omniscience of retrospect, all these composers and more (Messiaen notably) were going, if not in the same direction, at least away from the same source, seeking alternatives to some or all of the old musical certainties: metrical rhythm and consecutive form, tonal harmony and consistency of voice, standard genres and regular groupings. Boulez was by no means prominent yet: no composition of his was heard in a large forum until 1948 or published until 1950. But in his music, right from 1945, he was unique in his determination.

He was set on his path by the year he spent, that of 1944–45, in Messiaen's class, as he later recalled: 'Names that were all but forbidden, and works of which we knew nothing, were held up for our admiration and were to arouse our intellectual curiosity. . . . Africa and Asia showed us that the prerogatives of "tradition" were not confined to any one part of the world, and in our enthusiasm we came to regard music as a way of life rather than an art: we were marked for life.'¹

In Boulez's case the admiration and the curiosity did not wash away—rather they intensified—a need to challenge, even to reject. Hence his equivocal relationship with his principal teacher. Though he eagerly followed rehearsals for the first performance of Messiaen's *Trois Petites Liturgies* in April 1945, in his later career as a conductor he has never touched the score, nor that of the complete *Turangalîla* (1946–48), preferring the works Messiaen wrote in the 1950s and 1960s—scores arguably influenced by his own music. At the time, the echo of

1. Pierre Boulez, 'A Class and Its Fantasies', *Orientations* (London, 1986), 404; the piece was originally published as a tribute to Messiaen on his fiftieth birthday. See also 'In Retrospect', in *ibid.*, 405–6.

Messiaen's symmetrical modes (such as the octatonic scale) remained detectable in his compositions only because those modes were being so punishingly negated, and for several years the pupil was expressly hostile to his erstwhile master. In a critical paragraph from one of his earliest essays, published in 1948, he concluded that Messiaen 'does not compose—he juxtaposes.'²

To some extent, the hostility was the display of a delayed adolescence; it was also a necessary fuel for the young composer's creative zeal. Boulez formed himself in explosive reaction against what he found around him—not just the dusty Conservatoire but Messiaen, Schoenberg, Berg, Bartók, Stravinsky, all of whom were furiously taken to task in the polemical articles he wrote during his twenties, just as they were being implicitly taken to task in his compositions of those years. His most typical way of arguing on behalf of his music was to show how it realized potentialities that had been glimpsed by his predecessors but fudged by them for want of perspicacity or intellectual bravery. For example, the same essay that criticizes Messiaen the 'juxtaposer'—an essay devoted to finding a way forward for rhythm—admonishes Bartók for having a rhythmic style 'much simpler and more traditional' than that of *The Rite of Spring*, Jolivet because 'his empirical technique has prevented him from going very far', Messiaen for failing to integrate rhythm and harmony, Schoenberg and Berg because they 'remain attached to the classical bar and the old idea of rhythm', and Varèse 'for spiriting away the whole problem of technique . . . [:] a facile solution which solves nothing'. Even Webern—whom the young Boulez took as a touchstone of unflinching modernism, and whom he was at pains to isolate from other members of that crucial grandfatherly generation as the only exemplar³—even Webern is glancingly, parenthetically chided for 'his attachment to rhythmic tradition'.

Messiaen recalled that during this period Boulez 'was in revolt against everything';⁴ Boulez himself remembers that 'it was our privilege to make the discoveries and also to find ourselves faced with nothing'.⁵ The artist who is 'against everything' can, by virtue of that, look around him and find 'nothing'. Boulez's iconoclasm was perhaps extreme, but not exceptional for a self-confident young man in his late teens and early twenties, especially in a world that had lost its bearings. What was exceptional was the fact that musical history yielded itself to iconoclasm—that a composer in these years could set himself against

2. Pierre Boulez, 'Proposals', *Stocktakings from an Apprenticeship* (Oxford, 1991), 49.

3. See, for example, his 1952 essay 'Possibly . . .', in *ibid.*, 114, and the conclusion of his 1961 encyclopedia entry on Webern, in *ibid.*, 303.

4. Claude Samuel, *Olivier Messiaen: Music and Color* (Portland, Oreg., 1994), 199.

5. Boulez, *Orientalisms*, 445.

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