New Ears for New Music

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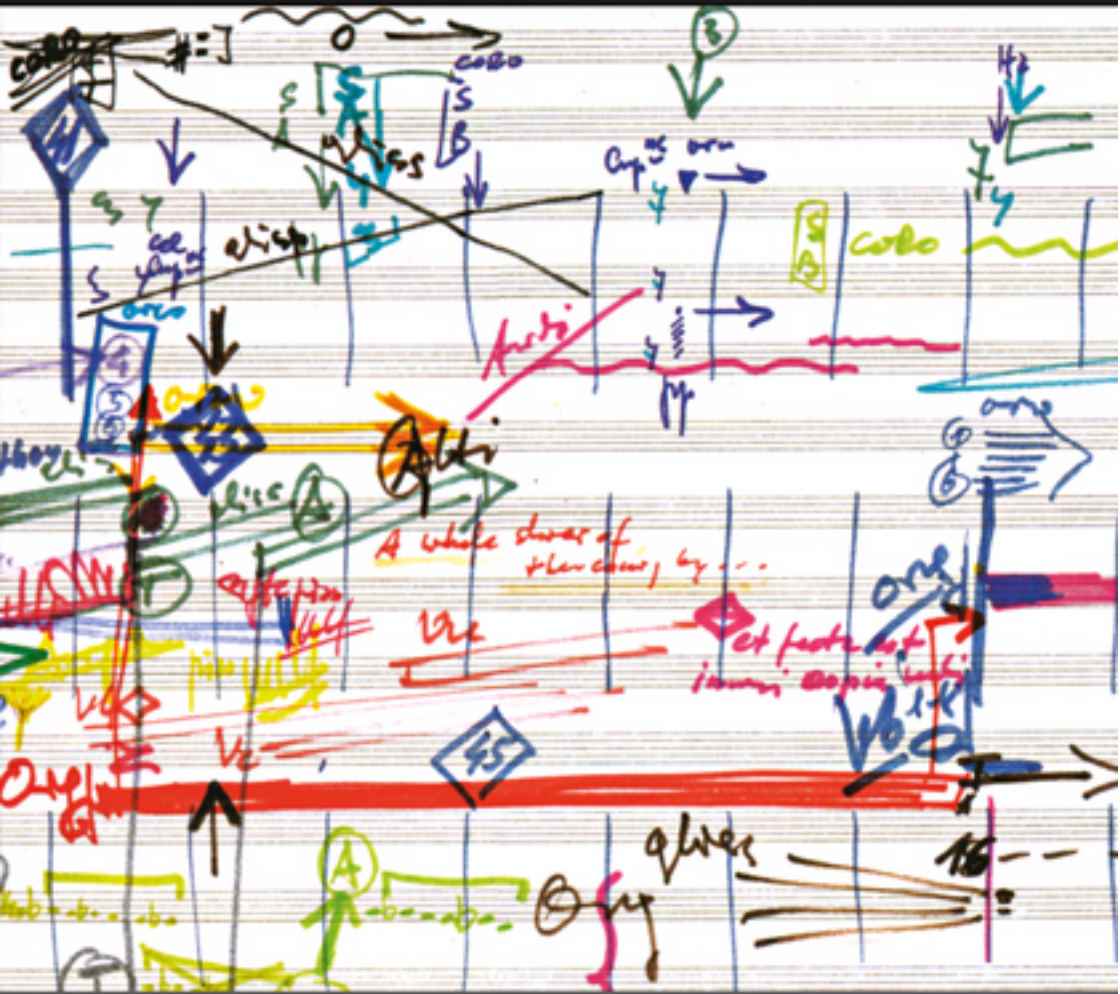

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Preface

"Why are we not allowed to write such beautiful
music as Johann Sebastian Bach?"
GYÖRGY LIGETI[1]

It is not just the literature and visual arts of a given era that are marked by a "Zeitgeist", but music is as well. Intellectual standpoints and social and political upheavals, and the reactions they provoke, are all reflected in the music of their time. The defining characteristic of 20th-century music was a dizzying multitude of different paths, with several occasionally contradictory currents often co-existing. And all these developments, even those that seem independent, have their roots in the spirit of the age.

The fact of dissonance as a marker of new music is intimately bound up with the human suffering that dates from the time of the First World War onwards, and the 20th century is rightly known as the bloodiest in the history of mankind. Such experiences found compelling artistic expression in Expressionist music.

Iwan Martynow put forward the theory that between the two world wars, music moved between two poles.[2] At one pole was despair, dread and hopelessness – the elements that permeate Alban Berg's inspired works. At the other was levity and lightness, superficiality and entertainment. Music was widely taken to be play, masquerade, a trick, irony or pastiche, "music about music". Much of what is termed Neo-Classicism or *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) belongs to this category.

The trauma inflicted by two world wars, the Holocaust, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and repeated crimes against humanity left a mark on music as well. Since 1945 at least, politically engaged music has consequently been a more or less continuous strong current.

The 20th century was particularly characterised by huge technological advances, by the spirit of invention and the joy of discovery – all symptomatic of a drive to develop the world of sound in every way possible, that resulted in experimental, inventive and innovative music. There were, of course, "retrogressive" tendencies too, associated with religious and spiritual needs, and a human desire for emotion and beauty as well.

This book provides an overview of the trends and directions in new music, and presents various aspects of the most important composers. My concern was to shed light on the contemporary historical, intellectual, psychological and social background to this *ars nova* as well. The music of the 20th century will be interpreted from this perspective for the first time in its entirety.

Originally, at a time when I myself composed, my intense interest in new music was as an artist. In 1960 I decided in favour of scholarship and gave up

composing completely. Since that time, new music has been a constant field of research for me. Initially, I focused my efforts on research into the music of the Second Viennese School and the work and aesthetic of György Ligeti. Later I turned to other composers. At the end of 1992 Breitkopf & Härtel published my extensive book on Alban Berg, subtitled "Music as Autobiography", and at the beginning of 1996 my book on Ligeti was published by Lafite in Vienna. I was lucky enough to have extended conversations with Ligeti, Hans Werner Henze, Luigi Nono, Friedhelm Döhl and Peter Ruzicka, and also got to know Wolfgang Rihm, György Kurtág, Arvo Pärt, Alfred Schnittke, Krzysztof Meyer, Roman Berger, Peter Michael Hamel, Anatol Vieru, Stefan Niculescu, Klaus Stahmer, Wolfgang Andreas Schultz, Manfred Stahnke and Wolfgang von Schweinitz personally. I would like to convey my heartfelt thanks to all those who have contributed to the creation of this book in any way: Mrs Nuria Schoenberg-Nono, Dr Claudia Vincis (Archivio Luigi Nono Venice), Dr Eike Fess (Arnold Schoenberg Center Vienna), Universal Edition AG, Internationaler Verlag Schott in Mainz, Verlage Sikorski in Hamburg, and above all Dr Kenneth Chalmers, for his conscientious and subtle translation. Michael Bock (Hamburg) was responsible for the formatting of the volume, and Michael Rücker and Thomas Papsdorf of Peter Lang Verlag provided valuable advice on printing.
The original German version of the chapter "Towards an Aesthetic of the Second Viennese School" has been expanded for this English edition.

From Expressionism to Experiment
Directions and Tendencies in New Music

"It is the interest in change that has
accelerated change to its giddy pace"
ERNST H. GOMBRICH[1]

Around 1320, the French composer and theoretician Philippe de Vitry wrote a treatise that would subsequently acquire wide renown, and which he entitled *Ars Nova*, with the intention of distinguishing the music of his time from that of the past, the so-called *ars antiqua*. Six centuries later, something similar happened in Germany. In 1919, the prestigious critic Paul Bekker talked about the "new music" that was superseding that of the late Romantics.[2] The salient features of this new music were the extension and dissolution of tonality, atonality, as it was known, twelve-note composition and the "emancipation of the dissonance". All were markers of a development that can mainly be traced through the works of the composers of the Second Viennese School. Arnold Schoenberg and his principal pupils, Anton von Webern and Alban Berg, represent the radical "modernists" of the first half of the twentieth century, the path that they took ultimately emerging from a conflict with the boldest achievements of "late-Romantic" music. In many of their late works, Wagner, Liszt, Bruckner and Mahler – to name only the leading composers – pushed music to the very brink of atonality, and in all four there are occasional, bold note-clusters and unresolved dissonances that anticipate Schoenberg's early Expressionist period.

The question of whether music develops in parallel with the other arts continues to be debated. Many music historians deny it categorically. The Romantics were of a different opinion. Robert Schumann, no less, claimed that, "the aesthetics of one art are the same as another; only the material is different".[3] No one today could deny that there are at least similarities of expression between the arts of a given period. If we can take it that the characteristics of literary Expressionism are a strong need for expression, compression of material, concentration on the essential, and rejection of decoration, then the same applies wholesale to the works that Schoenberg, Webern and Berg wrote in their atonal period. It is significant that all three had a preference for Expressionist poetry; Schoenberg wrote Expressionist dramas such as *Erwartung*, op.17 and *Die glückliche Hand*, op.18, and is said to have commented, "Music is not there to decorate, it should be true."[4] It is surely no coincidence that most of the works that date from his atonal period are either vocal pieces, or take their inspiration from a text. Of each published opus of Schoenberg's, up to op.22, it is interesting that only five are purely instrumental, while in Webern's output, vocal works far outstrip instrumental ones.

In his *Harmonielehre* of 1911, Schoenberg argued that art at its highest level should be exclusively concerned with reproducing "inner nature".[5] Wassily Kandinsky expressed similar thoughts in his near-contemporary groundbreaking book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, the manifesto of a new aesthetic that broke with the imitation of "external nature" and aspired to the "unnatural, abstract and to inner nature".[6] Kandinsky got to know Schoenberg and some of his works in 1911, and wrote enthusiastically about them: "Schoenberg's music takes us into a new realm, where the musical experiences are not acoustic ones, but purely spiritual. This is the beginning of the 'Music of the Future'".[7]

A statement made by Schoenberg in his *Harmonielehre* is highly characteristic of the Expressionist artist. It reads, "That which is new and unusual about a new harmony occurs to the true composer only because he must give expression to something that moves him, something new, something previously unheard-of. That can also be a new sound, but I believe it is far more than that: a new sound is a symbol, discovered involuntarily, a symbol proclaiming the new man who so asserts his individuality."[8] The literary scholar Walter H. Sokel rightly denoted the Expressionist artist as a "Poeta dolorosus",[9] and it has to be said that the musical idiom minted by Schoenberg and his pupils expressed anguish above all. Its sounds are mostly codes for fear, loneliness, despair and dread. Helene Berg once defined her husband as "a specialist in setting the gruesome to music"[10]. Indeed, no other composer could have set Georg Büchner's words "Der Mensch ist ein Abgrund, es schwindelt einem, wenn man hinunterschaut" (man is an abyss, you feel dizzy when you look down into it) in Act 3 Scene 1 of *Wozzeck*, or the eerie attic scene in the third act of *Lulu* so harrowingly. Adorno grasped an essential truth when he wrote, "The first atonal works are case studies in the sense of psychoanalytical dream case studies".[11] The emancipation of the dissonance does not seem to match *serenitas*, or exhilaration of any kind. In this light, Hans Werner Henze's comment that the Second Viennese School as well as the post-Expressionist school had "no vocabulary of mirth" seems justified.[12]

The development of each and every art is determined by diverging forces, and the dialectic of advance and retreat has a part to play. While many composers train their sights on the future, others take their bearings from the past. Wagner, who coined the phrase "music of the future", had set himself the goal of renewing the art of composition by every means possible, not least by "wedding" it to poetry. Brahms, on the other hand, was firmly convinced had music had already reached its highest point before him.

As an intellectual movement, so-called neo-classicism started in Paris, and quickly took hold in many areas of cultural life, literature, visual arts and music. The leading figures in the movement were Jean Cocteau, Guillaume Apollinaire and Erik Satie. As early as 1916, Cocteau had drafted his *Esthétique du minimum* and espoused economy of means. His call of "back to the classics" signi-

fied a plea for a return to "order" and "elegance", and at the same time for a distancing from emotionalism. He repeatedly invoked the work of Picasso, whom he felt to be a kindred spirit, and repeatedly sought to contact Stravinsky.[13] Apollinaire put forward something similar in 1918 in an essay entitled *L'Esprit nouveau et les poètes*. 1918 also saw the appearance, just as the First World War was ending, of Prokofiev's *Classical Symphony* and Stravinsky's *The Soldier's Tale*, and two years later Stravinsky wrote his *Pulcinella*, a suite on themes by Pergolesi (and others). In 1913, with his *Sacre du printemps*, Stravinsky had appeared to many to be a revolutionary and *enfant terrible*; with these two later works he completed his departure from the style of his Russian ballets, bound up as they were with Russian folklore and traditions.

Around the same time, in January 1920, Ferruccio Busoni wrote a letter to Paul Bekker that was later to become famous under the title of *Young Classicism*.[14] What he principally meant by this term was stripping out the sensual, choosing austerity over subjectivity, regaining serenity (*serenitas*) and above all "absolute music". He was articulating what many had in mind, and were calling for: the rejection of 19th-century art, freedom from the literary, and the expressive rejection of programme music – all of which he had already put forward in 1907, in his *Entwurf einer neuen Ästhetik der Tonkunst*.[15] It would be wrong, however, to think that Busoni's proposal found nothing but approval. Both Hindemith and Schoenberg, who had read the pamphlet closely and commented on it when it was republished in 1916, had many objections to it. Hindemith's comments on some of Busoni's ideas were not just sarcastic, but downright withering. On Busoni's definition of "absolute music" as something "sober, like orderly rows of instrumental desks, or a tonic-dominant relationship, or developments and codas", Hindemith observed, "This absolute music has long since ceased to exist. Those of its representatives who might still be alive are to be seen in the better class of natural history museum".[16] And Schoenberg could not resist commenting on Busoni's utter condemnation of programme music, "Music can mimic how a person is inside, and in this sense, programme music is possible".[17] It is odd that as intelligent a musician as Busoni could write the letter of January 1922 to Fritz Windisch, publisher of *Melos*, in which he attacked neo-classicism in the strongest terms.[18]

In 1939, Stravinsky was invited by Harvard University to give a series of lectures on musical poetics.[19] On a first reading of his ideas it is no small surprise to see how far they conform to the aesthetic Cocteau proposed.[20] Stravinsky espouses musical craftsmanship, order and construction. He criticises "modernism", and the idea of progress in the arts, and makes his own Verdi's admonition "Torniamo all'antico e sarà un progresso".[21] His ideals are "academicism" and the living tradition. His hatred of Wagner, of the idea of art as a religion and of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is symptomatic. From this starting-point, it becomes easier to understand how he comes out in favour of the goal of art as

"diversion".[22] His whole mindset is diametrically opposed to that of Schoenberg. Stravinsky's call to order found an echo in many countries. A great many composers took it as an invitation to focus on construction and technical mastery. Stravinsky's sound-world, his personal style of extended tonality and above all his complex metrical and rhythmic schemes became internationally famous. And during his neo-classical period Stravinsky never tired of fighting passionately for music to be recognised as an independent art. He consequently moved an enormous distance away from the aesthetic precepts of his Russian period and the three great ballets (*The Firebird*, *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring*) that after their Paris premieres had established his fame in Europe. To a large extent, the astonishingly colourful nature of the music of these works derived from the exciting scenic and choreographic situations that they illustrated so wonderfully. This marked a genuine triumph of a specific kind of programme music.

Adorno's widely-read *Philosophie der neuen Musik* that appeared in 1949 contains an apologia for Schoenberg and twelve-note music, and a crushing criticism of Stravinsky that caused a furore. Schoenberg is identified with progress, Stravinsky, in contrast, with restoration. Based on his conviction that psychoanalysis should serve transcendental philosophy, Adorno draws on many psychiatric categories and accuses Stravinsky of infantilism, depersonalisation, schizophrenia (hebephrenia) and catatonia. Although much of this critique is compelling, Schoenberg himself felt the need to speak up for his rival Stravinsky. "By the way, it's disgusting," he wrote to Hans Stuckenschmidt on 5 December 1949, "the way he [Adorno] treats Stravinsky".[23] Several decades later, György Ligeti singled Stravinsky out as the most significant composer of the 20th century.[24] Adorno's criticism of Stravinsky is easier to understand in the light of his belief in humanity, which he found convincingly expressed in artistic terms in the music of the Second Viennese School composers, particularly in Berg's *Wozzeck*, while he ascribed "anti-expression" and "lack of feeling" to Stravinsky.[25]

To a large extent, 20th-century music was marked by an attempt to explore every path in the world of sound, and to exploit areas of it that had not been dreamt of before. These common denominators cover a whole range of directions and trends, the most obvious being the idea of being able to renew music by using new materials and instruments, new tonal systems, with noise and other experiments. Let us look at the broad outlines.

Dating from round the beginning of the movement are the futurist manifestos of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti that appeared between 1909 and 1910.[26] They exalt the wonders of the technical world, machines and mechanical things, locomotives, the speed of trains and automobiles and above all the beauty of speed. Francesco Balilla Pratella, the first composer who thought up a *Musica futuristica per orchestra*, in 1912, declared in a preface, that Verdi's words

"Torniamo all'antico" were "abhorrent, stupid and cowardly". Luigi Russolo is certainly a significant figure: he turned to the acoustic world of noise and developed a system of classification for the futurist orchestra, dividing noises into six categories: crashes and thunder, whistles and hisses, murmurs and rustles, screeches and grating sounds, percussive sounds (booms), human and animal voices. To generate these noises, by 1916 he had constructed no fewer than 21 noise-makers, his so-called *intonarumori*.

There is no doubt that Russolo had an inventive mind: one of his constructions was an "rumorarmonio", a kind of harmonium with two bass pedals that was able to play not just whole tones and semitones, but micro-intervals as well. The musical impact of Futurism was admittedly limited, and lost any significance as the movement began to align itself with Mussolini's regime. Today we associate only two works with the term Futurism: Arthur Honegger's *Pacific 231* of 1924, and Max Brand's music-drama *Maschinist Hopkins* of 1929.

Russolo's futurist aesthetic was a crucial spur to the French musician and author Pierre Schaeffer, who created so-called *musique concrète*. From 1948 on, he began to experiment with noises in the RTF Studio in Paris, with the goal of making the world of acoustic processes serve an artistic purpose. His "Concerts de bruits" drew on every imaginable everyday noise, water sounds, scraps of speech, and the sounds of exotic instruments. His experiments attracted the attention of such renowned composers as Pierre Boulez, Jean Barraqué, Marcel Delannoy and Henri Dutilleux, and Olivier Messaien, no less, composed a piece of *musique concrète*, entitled *Timbres-Durées* in 1952.[27]

Busoni delighted in new, reforming ideas on music. As early as 1907 he declared a harmonic revolution, and wrote, "For some time the third-tone has been asking for admittance, and we are still ignoring its message".[28] He also made reference to the "dynamophon", the invention of a Dr Thaddeus Cahill in America. The enormous device that Cahill had constructed made it possible to divide the octave endlessly, and Busoni consequently thought it would be possible to design a sixth-tone system. It was also Busoni who prompted Alois Hába and Ivan Vishnegradsky to compose microtonal music. Hába wrote a great many works in semitone, quarter-tone, fifth-tone and sixth-tone systems,[29] and Vishnegradsky quite a few in quarter, third, fifth, sixth and twelfth-tone systems.[30] Harry Partch is a special case, having developed an extremely complex system of pure vibration. His principal successor is Manfred Stahnke, the most important representative of microtonality in Germany today. Very little can be said with any certainty about the aesthetic effect of microtonal music, since it can be only heard only extremely rarely.[31]

The composer Edgard Varèse must be counted among the most important experimental figures in music. He studied first in Paris with Charles-Marie Widor, Albert Roussel and Vincent d'Indy, then struck up a friendship with Busoni in Berlin, and in 1919 settled in the United States. Prompted by Busoni's

observation, "Composition was born free, and to win freedom is its destiny,"[32] he spent his life striving to "free sound" using every means imaginable. He consequently explored the use of new instruments, tape and electronics. He was fascinated by Hermann von Helmholtz's experiments with sirens, which he used in some of his scores (*Amériques* of 1918-1921, and *Ionisation* of 1930-31). He represented the notion that music belonged to both art and science, and made Hoëné Wronski's definition of music as "the incarnation of the intelligence inherent in sound" his own.[33]

Three ideas above all have fascinated and inspired composers in the second half of the 20th century: firstly, the notion that one should ignore tradition completely and begin again from zero; secondly, the requirement to explore sounds and noises and the entire acoustical world in every direction in dedicated laboratories; and thirdly, the idea that composing should have a scientific basis. Interestingly, it was Cocteau who defined music as "science made flesh".[34]

In the 1950s, electronic music studios were set up under various names in several European cities, as well as in Tokyo and the United States. The first and most significant appeared as early as 1950, in the broadcasting centre of West German radio in Cologne, on the instigation of Herbert Eimert, who collaborated with the technician Fritz Enkel and the physicist Werner Meyer-Eppler. Electronic music was distinguished from traditional music in that it experimented with sine tones, which are devoid of all harmonics, with sound mixing, and what is known as white noise. The earliest electronic works were by Karel Goeyvaerts, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Giselher Klebe, Gottfried Michael Koenig and György Ligeti. The most widely-known piece was Stockhausen's *Gesang der Jünglinge* (1955-56), a work that includes speech sounds as well as sine tones and noise, and is intended for five groups of loudspeakers.

It is safe to say that electronic music opened up an almost limitless potential in terms of sonorities (new sounds and noises), and could prompt particular associations. Since the first experiments in this direction demonstrated quite chaotic relationships, Stockhausen was apparently the first to structure the rhythms of his electronic pieces serially.[35] There is clearly a connection between these experiments and the emergence of so-called serial music. Serialism takes up Schoenberg's method of composing with twelve different notes, but goes much further, organising *a priori* not just pitches, but every parameter of the composition according to a series – duration, intensity and even types of attack. This compositional principal was elevated to the status of avant-garde doctrine. Many young composers (Stockhausen and Boulez were joined by Luigi Nono, Bruno Maderna, Henri Pousseur and others) adopted it, and no less a figure than Ernst Křenek coined the witticism that serialism had conclusively freed composers from the tyranny of inspiration.[36] This dialectical reasoning is easier to understand if we take on board that what Křenek called "inspiration" was for him essentially fortuitous, and also that he himself discovered "chance" opera-

tions in what was known as "totally determined" music, since in his opinion consonances could not be regulated serially. These considerations led to the seemingly paradoxical conclusion that the gap between serialism and aleatoric composition (*alea* being Latin for "dice") is not so great as it appears at first sight,, since ultimately every freely-chosen row depends on chance and is therefore as random as chance. There is, however, an essential difference between the work of the serial composers and the operations of a dice thrower.

However promising a beginning it might have had as a compositional principle, serialism was not destined to have a long life. It was first rocked by the publication of an essay by Ligeti in 1958 that convincingly demonstrated that the apparent mathematical logic of this type of musical construction neither guaranteed musical coherence nor had an exact correlation in physical perception.[37] John Cage's aleatoric concepts contributed further to the essential general uncertainty: they countered the serialists' belief in completely determined elements, wherever possible, with chance and indetermination. Apart from that, Cage ensured a "non-intentional" art of chaos through his theories, influenced by East Asian Zen Buddhism.

The idea of the musical avant-garde is closely bound up with the term "progress" – a somewhat arresting, and dubious term, if taken to denote "artistic" progress. (In comparison, the question of historical, social, technological or ecological progress is easier to answer.) The serialists invoked the "tendency of the material" postulated by Adorno – a formulation that has become famous and which ultimately should have justified twelve-note technique. Interestingly, he did not define the term "material" merely in terms of music theory, but in psychological and sociological terms as "sedimented spirit, preformed socially by human consciousness". As an "objective" spirit, the musical material is subject to the same processes as society, of which it is, after all, the expression, and for Adorno these processes follow the law of progress. The material consequently "demands" that the composer discard everything outdated and threadbare in music and always use those means that match the most recent stage of musical technique – and of social development. Nevertheless, for Adorno, Schoenberg's twelve-note method represented the very latest stage of technique.[38]

It is true that as early as 1955, Boulez had spoken of serialism not just as fertile ground to be ploughed, but also raised the issue of its "limits".[39] Toward the end of the 1970s many commentators were stating that the voyage of discovery through the world of sound was at an end, that the material had been exhausted. The modernists seemed to have lost, and a wide-ranging discussion began on musical "post-modernism". Around the same time, in 1977, IRCAM, the Institut de recherche et de coordination acoustique/musique, was founded in Paris, an ambitious institution that, under the directorship of Boulez, was charged with marrying information technology and music.[40]

In 1978, Hans-Jürgen von Bose felt the need to take stock, as spokesperson for the younger generation of composers, and explicitly distanced himself from "assumed belief in progress".[41] He spoke passionately of the "yearning for a lost beauty and content" – a content that was to be formulated anew for everyone individually. This was an acknowledgement of expression and a commitment to the "post-modernism" that seems to be the dominant voice everywhere today. Its most prominent representatives are successful, possibly because they write music that is relatively simply – sometimes exceptionally simply – constructed, that takes up the familiar, fills the emotional deficit and satisfies spiritual needs as well. Interestingly, as early as December 1983 Messiaen took stock of this in the course of an interview, when he stated that "Serialism, abstraction, aleatoric music, they are all things of the past. The direction today is completely different," defining this with reference to emotion and sensibility.[42]

The musical avant-garde and the post-modernists have fundamentally different goals. In the final analysis, these come down to progress and regression, forward and backward movement, and refusal and readiness to compromise. The success of the post-modernists (which might be temporary) can be attributed not least to the fact that they meet the aesthetic and emotional needs of a broad audience far more than the former avant-garde.

Nevertheless, the impression should not be given that the erstwhile avant-garde has now completely disappeared from the scene. Brian Ferneyhough, who is active in Freiburg, and Helmut Lachenmann count among its most prominent representatives. Lachenmann has been, and continues to be, highly controversial. Famous as the representative of "musica negativa", he strives, on his own admission, to "treat familiar idioms with loving destructiveness" which he himself understands to be at the same time "creatively constructive". Music thus appears to him as both: "as a field of rubble and a new force field".[43] For Lachenmann, art is creative provocation, the mobilising of intellectual resistance to the culinary, to the temporary gratification of false yearnings.[44]

Ligeti once rightly remarked that many 20th-century composers owe their success to a few works that for some reason became popular. He pointed to Ravel's *Boléro* and Stravinsky's three great ballets, which continue to interest audiences. Yet with a certain puzzlement he asked the question, "But who today is interested in such a wonderful work as Stravinsky's *Symphony of wind instruments* of 1920?"[45]