

Maciej Gołąb

Musical Modernism in the Twentieth Century

Between Continuation, Innovation
and Change of Phonosystem

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Introduction

To the modern historian, the history of music appears in a shortened time perspective, making modern music historiography very different from that practised by the previous generations of musicologists. The first major historiographical initiative of Classical German musicology, Ernst Bücken's *Handbuch der Musikgeschichte*, was characterised by a proportional presentation of all epochs of music history in separate synthetic books, written by leading scholars in each field. Heinrich Bessler's *Musik des Mittelalters und der Renaissance* (1931) provided a balance for its chronological opposite, Hans Mersmann's *Die Moderne Musik seit der Romantik* (1931). Today, such editorial initiatives have been thoroughly remodelled. If the latest edition of *The Oxford History of Western Music*, edited by Richard Taruskin, illustrates this evolution of approach to history, especially in the typical post-modern shortening of its time perspective, we might not be surprised to discover that the "history of Western music" as a historical narrative starts only in the seventeenth century, earliest history having been squeezed into a single volume with a focus on palaeography (*The Earliest Notations to the Sixteenth Century*), while later epochs have been merged into one, despite being very different in character (*The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*). Separated from the Classical tradition from which it originated, the nineteenth century keeps an unmotivated singularity (*The Nineteenth Century*), while music history of the twentieth century is presented in two separate volumes (*Music in the Early Twentieth Century* and *Music in the Late Twentieth Century*).¹ We can't help thinking that from the position not only of modernist but even cognitively reasonable historiography, such treatment of past historical epochs is simply a distortion of reality, serving as it does to petrify the mechanism of "repression of history" in favour of what is contemporary or recent. The paradigm of a weak past and strong present in music history has never been as relevant as today.

This state of affairs presents the historian of twentieth-century music with a number of challenges. Increased readership is only an illusory comfort. The revolution in means of social communication and an increased non-specialist interest in modern music history as well as a new focus on interdisciplinary research do present new challenges unknown, on this scale, to historians of earlier music. New research objects emerge, such as the twentieth-century audiosphere or soundscape, transcending the scope of the discipline hitherto responsible for

1 Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*; Taruskin, *Music in the Late Twentieth Century*.

their analysis (musicology), becoming the topic of debate between cultural studies scholars, idea historians, geographers, anthropologists, and cultural sociologists. A large group of specialists from different disciplines of the humanities, conscious of the cultural importance of the audiosphere, include it in their research, using freshly coined categories and notions, inspired by the everyday vocabulary of literary and music criticism or adapted from traditional music theory. Neither can really satisfy the cognitive expectations attached to them. The former has created an improvised, imprecise dictionary, useful merely at the frontline of cognising phenomena of the phonosystem. Phonosystem is one of the pivotal notions of this book: the ensemble of acoustic phenomena generated by man and used not only in purely musical or, more broadly, artistic utterances but also in a number of cultural and civilisational statements, contributing to the density of everyday life.² Traditional, detailed music theory, on the other hand, developed its own central categories from the material of modern music, making them useful exclusively in the context of that historically determined area of artistic music phenomena, limited chronologically by the end of Romanticism. But a general theory of music that would offer the key to understanding music history in the twentieth century has not yet seen the light, and there is also no music history that would provide related disciplines with new notions and categories in their study of the man-generated cultural soundscape. This is a major gap, which can only be filled by a musicologist oriented toward both history and theory. The history of musical modernism in the twentieth century as a problem of self-organisation of the phonosystem may provide a convenient base for fulfilling this research objective.

A reflection on twentieth-century music is both fascinating and deceptive. We try to grasp the entire epoch, lasting over a hundred years, yet without the certainty enjoyed by ancient music historians that this epoch has truly concluded. It has unfolded and continues to unfold in front of us, and any historian might have witnessed a number of important historical events. We have spoken to leading composers, first forming an opinion about them as artists (mostly through our milieu) but also their human traits that our students like so much. We have (or not) joined the critical discussion about modern music. We have witnessed a number of first performances of works that later entered the musical canon, and as members of artists' associations in Central and Eastern Europe, we have witnessed the struggle of the musical community against the Communist regime, followed by the latter's helplessness in the period of democratic transformation. What remains exclusively a matter of historical imagination to the ancient music historian is for us, a vivid memory. Artistic debates between composers have repeatedly involved musicologists to the point of abandoning the impartial position

2 The latter are of interest inasmuch as they are embedded into artistic situations.

required of our profession. Moreover, we paradoxically know more but see less, burdened as we are by information overload. In that, we are truly children of our time, and participation in culture has forever shaped our historical imagination, research horizon, and our hierarchy of values. We do share these preoccupations with general historians, with the difference that the objects and nature of our observations are subtler and more resistant to historical interpretation.

Writing a traditional, i.e. idiographic, erudite history of twentieth-century music today has lost its former point, because of the heuristic and lexicographic achievements of modern musicology. These achievements appear to be so significant that they obtain deserved praise from the other humanities. So does it make sense to idiographically write about composers and their works in the context of different musical styles and tendencies? Of course not, because those “shifting truths” of twentieth-century music historiography have lost their (once justified) informative value. Readers interested in the work of a given composer will not seek data on that composer and interpretations of his works in synthetic historiographical works but in authoritative source editions and lexicons. This equally pertains to systematic categories of twentieth-century music such as dodecaphony, punctualism, sonorism, modalism, etc. Their descriptions are to be found in different “Sachteils”: the objective section of encyclopaedias (or integrated encyclopaedias such as the *British Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* or the German *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, as well as dictionaries and summaries of modern compositional techniques, which there is no room here to enumerate). Of course, the history of twentieth-century music can be narrated as a simple “this is what happened” story, according to the naïve cognitive programme initiated by Johann Gustav Droysen: an unpretentious music factography whose well-documented “immobile truths” remain valuable also because the recent trend toward a “new idiographism” brings them back to life. This phenomenon is illustrated by the many reprints of Nicholas Slonimsky’s old book.³ German musicography has produced an outstanding multi-volume synthesis of twentieth-century music seen from the point of view of different musical genres.⁴ The true task of a musicologist today is to focus on autonomous criteria of historical research, criteria that we do not share with art or literature historians nor with cultural historians. It will be my endeavour in this book to propose a certain way of thinking about twentieth-century music, based on new methodological premises.

One of the issues that always emerge in twentieth-century music historiography is, of course, the selection of research objects. That dilemma is, in fact, inherent

3 Slonimsky, *Music Since 1900*.

4 See Danuser, ed., *Handbuch der Musik im 20. Jahrhundert*. For the editor’s synthetic summary of that book, see Danuser, *Die Musik des 20. Jahrhunderts*.

especially to older writings on the music of the past century (and it does haunt the historians of past epochs, although the older the music, the less poignant the issue) because historical selection of material has not yet been enacted, and casual reception strategies by critics, audiences and the media impose criteria of material valuation upon the historian. Is it easy to exclude a composer that lives in your city, enjoys many professional relations, is an honorary doctor of many academies and an esteemed member of the composers' community, as well as manages a number of socio-artistic projects? It is, of course, a rhetorical question. Apart from its obvious pragmatic aspect, the dilemma in fact consists of the difficulty in reaching an intersubjective agreement on the selection of material for historical interpretation. This very dilemma generates questions such as, "Why this composer and not another?," "Why this musical work instead of that other?," "What about composers X, Y and Z?" These questions are primarily asked by authors of conventional historical books. They are the fodder of music criticism, with composers counting the lines of the articles dedicated to them, comparing them with other articles; they become the object of countless hidden negotiations that belong more to artistic criticism than methodologically disciplined history, that needs to be based on premises of a general music history theory.⁵

What is history? The postulate of the above-mentioned Droysen sums it up: one should write "what was" ("das, was war"). But is it possible? Surely not: every apprentice of history knows that. Abandoning for a moment the question of historiographical models, in the absence of which writing is like walking in the dark, especially with regard to twentieth-century music where there is a mass of fragmentary research and the number of sources seems unlimited, we should point out that writing "what was" is undermined by the above-mentioned issue of selection criteria. When Alicja Jarzębska published her introduction to the musical culture of the twentieth century,⁶ reviewers started pointing out the lack of this or that composer. One asked why were so many pages dedicated to Krzysztof Penderecki where there was not even a mention of other leading Polish authors? Essentially, someone is always omitted. That is not the problem: the main problem is the overall direction. Yet if there is no defined methodological approach, any approach to twentieth-century music history will always be subject to such discussions: there is no way to satisfy all such objective claims. The historian's task is to show his or her intellectual approach as both a finished (systemic) and open whole. It is no paradox. The outcome should show a systemic framework within which the

5 Another aspect of modern music historiography is its aspectuality, focusing on the new, experimental musical in certain cultural areas. For example, written from the position of a music critic in the 1970s, Michael Nyman's book *Experimental Music. Cage and Beyond* limits itself to the Anglo-American tradition of experimental music.

6 Jarzębska, *Spór o piękno muzyki*.

different studies of individual composers' styles will be treated (and interpreted by the reader) as the manifestation of a broader cultural tendency and not as a unique phenomenon, competing with other, similar or dissimilar phenomena, as has traditionally been suggested by musicology or more precisely, the theory and aesthetics of music. The very hypostasis of "music" indirectly suggests that it is an emanation of certain cultural values and at the time, the field of a cultural self-organisation of the phonosystem, as opposed to a cumulative set of monadic or microcosmic entities making up a collection of musical works. Therefore, we could argue that the casual formation of a canon (of names or works) is essentially the task of music critics and not of historiography, especially a nomothetic one. The latter should perform its own functions, less directly connected with music criticism (if someone has scientific ambitions, needless to say). If in Alicja Jarzębska's book, Penderecki "examples" were an exemplification of a given tendency in musical culture, the problem would not exist.

Let us declare from the onset something that isn't actually obvious in current historiography: it is impossible to practice any history of music, and especially twentieth-century music, without basing it on a theory of history, even though the latter has been the *bête noire* of postmodernist ideology. Can a literature or art historian do without a normative theory of history? I couldn't say, but I am convinced that music history differs from other humanities. If we refuse to indiscriminately imitate art or literature history, bending the interpretation of our research objects to methodological conventions worked out in other disciplines, we need to look at history through musical structures. This premise is not to be understood literally: the historical narrative should not focus exclusively on various musical works, their components, or compositional techniques. It should represent a deeper understanding of the relationship between history and musical structure (musical material), its hidden interactions with its spatial and temporal extrapolations.⁷

7 Theodor W. Adorno addressed the issue of "musical material" from the philosophical point of view. Opposing "material" to the Hegelian notion of "content," Adorno writes: "Material, by contrast, is what artists work with: It is the sum of all that is available to them, including words, colours, sounds, associations of every sort and every technique ever developed. To this extent, forms too can become material; it is everything that artists encounter about which they must make a decision. ... The concept of material is presupposed by alternatives such as whether a composer works with sounds that are native to tonality and recognizable as its derivatives, or whether he radically eliminates them Thus material is not natural material even if it appears so to artists; rather, it is thoroughly historical." See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 148. See also the exegesis in Dahlhaus, "Adornos Begriff des musikalischen Materials." As we know, the above-cited work also includes Adorno's prolegomena to a theory of musical modernism. As suggestive as his approach is, if often confused, it has influenced my choice of the subject of the present dissertation.

As we know, in the music of past epochs, the musical work constitutes a phenotype of the compositional system with its elaborated subsystems (tonal harmony, syntax, timbre and texture, genre and form), remaining under the “control of history” as an element of that system, casually if imprecisely known as the major–minor tonal system. In the twentieth century, on the other hand, the work becomes a unique extrapolation of its own individual characteristics that build an internal system as a deductive, aprioristic whole. Looking from the outside, the work becomes an element of a giant patchwork: a manifestation of itself (or a certain group of works) instead of a single representation of a universal system of music composition. In the twentieth century, there is no fundamental structure (*Ursatz*) in the ancient systemic and compositional sense. We have known this for some time. But isn’t there a different fundamental structure to that giant patchwork? Not a musical systemic one, but a historical and cultural one? We will seek an answer to this question.

Musical structure (or rather, in Adorno’s understanding, musical material) as a central object of music history was also, more latently, the foundation of musical work analysis as practised by one of Poland’s most influential musicologists: Józef Chomiński. His theory of sonology, developed in the 1960s, has recently generated several ramifications, primarily as a theory of musical work analysis. It has much more rarely, if ever, been continued in historical interpretations of a certain phase in twentieth-century music. The issue here is not so much to rigorously adapt Chomiński’s notions and categories of work analysis to the study of newer sound phenomena, particularly those originating in the second half of the twentieth century. This has always been and remains possible. It is more about the development of post-sonological musicological language so as to enable a gradual transgression of analytical observation of musical work phenomenology, toward creating the bases for an autonomous historiography of the twentieth century, independent from musical criticism. In the present book, I shall develop some aspects of Chomiński’s descriptive theory of musical sonology (especially in Chapter 5), but primarily the idea of historical music phenomenism, implicit in his writings (mostly systematic ones) even though Chomiński did not put it into practical use in his own syntheses of either “general” or “Polish” music history. Even when Chomiński practised a historical phenomenism of music, he always emphasised analysis. On the other hand, the emphasis of the present book is not on analysis but on music historiography in the broad sense, whose detailed foundations I shall present shortly.⁸

This book, in its methodological foundations, does not follow conventional music historiography, which has become autoreferential and limits itself to

8 Its methodological premises will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 1. For Chomiński’s analytical theory of sonology and its applications, see the various texts in *Muzyka* 53, no. 1 (2008).

producing subsequent “music histories of the twentieth century.” What we need today are not these multiple syntheses but a discussion on how to practise twentieth-century music historiography. We first and foremost need music historians to stop fetishizing the obsolete “-isms” and slavishly imitate colleagues from the mainstream of historical research (cultural history) instead of speaking with their own voice. The difficulty lies in that the methodology of music historiography has always been indebted to other humanities (primarily history), in direct proportion to the extent in which it failed to put the musical work and its material (structure) at the centre of its narrative.⁹ The present history of twentieth-century musical modernism, therefore, chooses as its object musical structure (i.e., not the musical work but its historical derivatives) seen in a cultural context. Not the work itself, therefore, but what cultural values that work was able to generate, in terms of radical novelty or merely change (recontextualised remittance). We might consider this a junction with Adorno’s “musical material.”

I have developed the methodological layer of this approach, working in my home ground of music theory and music aesthetics, whose elements became the foundations of a general theory of modern music. This is as little and as much as musicology can offer to historical research. Musicology, in fact, has never been able to create a historical narrative that would inspire other humanities with a universal idea, allowing a cognition and understanding of cultural history. I doubt this could ever happen: it is not a failure on the side of musicologists but is due to the specificity of musicology’s object and the consequent hermeticism of its interests. At the same time, musicology’s distinctive object legitimises any efforts of exploring the artistic potential of culture through the material (structure) of musical works. Since this task, nonetheless, requires different methodological strategies centred on cultural history as a process, I have borrowed these strategies from outside my home discipline, out of a deep conviction that it is impossible to practise a valuable music historiography without a broader philosophical position. I have primarily been inspired by the idea of a musical-aesthetical historiography based on different theories of culture, adapted to my specific task.¹⁰

9 Józef Chomiński did not see any room for musicologists other than interpreting the relations between music and various disciplines of culture; see Chomiński, “Teoria muzyki a reorganizacja studiów muzykologicznych.” He wrote thus: “To give music theory the leading role in the ensemble of musicological disciplines is problematic. I am convinced that we ought to distinguish between three departments of music theory: general theory, detailed theory, and methodology. General music theory would include a reflection on music’s essence and relations to different disciplines of culture and social activity. There are four distinctive issues arising here: music and ideology; music and society; music and art; music and literature.” *Ibid.*, 29. I will not follow this path.

10 I will refer to these methodological models mostly in the introduction to the different chapters of this book.