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# What kind of history is *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music*?

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There can be few living adults who believe any longer, if they ever did, that dates are arbitrary and meaningless. Scientifically, dates pretty much ought to be so, but just as the end of the nineteenth century was much feted in Western society, even more were the first moments of 1 January 2000 felt to be momentous. Opinion is bound to differ, but it is at least reasonable to suggest that it was the century's end, rather than that of a millennium, that seemed more meaningful to us. We and our forebears have been living with the idea of The American Century since as early as 1941 when magazine owner Henry Luce put the phrase into circulation; and very round dates have certainly caught the imagination of publishers, not least Cambridge University Press. That may all be a ploy, or a coincidence, but musicologists are well aware that research indicators such as dissertation topics in the 1980s and 1990s showed people confidently investigating what was often called something like the "end of modernism", and the extensive discussions of postmodernism contributed to the certainty that Western culture had somehow clicked forward, after about a hundred years, give or take a decade or two. In 2004 CUP launched a new journal, *Twentieth-Century Music*, and published *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music*. The *History* was a major undertaking not only for its editors,

Nicholas Cook and the late Anthony Pople, but surely also for each of the other twenty-two main contributors, picking their way through terrain that has often not been explored in quite the same way before, yet in many cases with a great weight of research tradition to bear in mind all the same.

Enough of tributes, however, as we move to the substance of this discussion, which is to ask how it all works. The *History* is and will be many things to many people, and in their introductory essay “Trajectories of twentieth-century music” the editors serenely lay out the twists and turns of a book offered “less as a pre-packaged historical solution than as a set of resources and commentaries designed to help the reader to make his or her own sense of the music of a century which it is hard, even now, to think of as consigned to a rapidly receding past” (p. 16). As historiographers, then, the editors would have probably opted, from among the definitions of such people in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to be thought of as chroniclers; as much more, that is, than mere compilers, yet not historians of a unified narrative via a continuous authorial voice.

Thoughts of unity and continuity in a large field of knowledge, speculation and theory lead me to contemplate another recently undertaken *magnum opus*, admittedly distinct in ways that in some respects almost defies comparison with the *History*, yet which in terms of synchronicity gives, I believe, great pause for thought. This is the new Penguin edition of the complete works of Sigmund Freud in English, as complete, that is, as Penguin’s copyright lawyers were able to achieve. The Penguin Freud is an extraordinary exercise in ways from which there may be much to be learned by non-specialists, while the specialists debate their strongly held positions, some negative to the point of being contemptuous — but then, original approaches to significant ventures will always tend to tread on some toes extremely painfully. The controversial approach of editor Adam Phillips, himself a practising psychoanalyst and widely read writer of alluring books about people and people’s problems, was twofold. First, he decided that each volume of Freud to be translated anew should be commissioned from a different translator. If that makes one gulp at the boldness of the enterprise, it is as nothing, secondly, compared with the fact that each translator is given complete freedom. This marks the end of Freudian terminology in English, or, it will if the books become widely used. Anecdotally, such a procedure might be thought iconoclastic, or you might assume it is the kind of untrammelled freedom likely to produce little more than boring absurdity. Yet on the contrary Phillips had a certain vision and it is one that — if I understand it correctly — makes every kind of sense to the lay person. What he sought was to free Freud from the pseudo-scientific jargon that has become a stock-in-trade of serious psychoanalysis and the endemic psycho-babble of modern,

globalized Western society. We all sort-of know what an “id” is, we certainly all use the word “ego”, and in educated circles one may hear talk of “parapraxis” and the like. This babble results from an early-to-mid twentieth-century canonization of certain translations of Freud’s words that have taken on the appearance of scientific, indeed even clinical terms. But Freud was a writer, Phillips protests, in fact a great writer, and his status as a writer of what are in essence stories can be restored if the pseudo-science is taken out of Freudianism; perhaps it is only so that can it be restored, demythologized.

Although it would have been whistling in the wind, some of those connected with the *Cambridge History* may well have mused at a certain stage of conception on entitling it the *Cambridge Histories of Twentieth-Century Music* (the editors also toy, predictably, with the alternative “*Musics*”: p. 7). Certainly the same kind of impulse that led Phillips to want to demythologize Freud by giving him a truly authorial voice such as a scrupulous translator given complete freedom of action can achieve, rather than cloaking him in the white coat and reading glasses of a learned clinician forensically carving up bits of the human soul, is at work in the kind of history of music that tries to write it as broadly as it is long, and as dispersed as it is Western. I shall return to this perspective.

One of the hard-nosed ways to assess the history of twentieth-century music is as a product, but this will always tend to be a totalising assessment. Regarding “music” as a portfolio of similar products will quickly lead any historian into bad comparison or blind alleys at best, and confusion at worst. Andrew Blake, in “To the millennium: music as twentieth-century commodity” (Ch. 18), is willing to confront such challenges by identifying what he calls a “new category of experience” from this period, “listening”, and a “new category of human subject, ‘the listener’” (p. 479), which shifts the problem, and very effectively too, from his point of view. He adopts a commendably contemporary stance, even noting the effect of “glocalization”, which is what happens when globalization is resisted or at least inflected locally, and his upbeat approach leads to one of the most positive diagnoses of the book, that “music, as a phenomenon isolated by the technologies of sound broadcasting and recording, was one of the most successful commodities of the century” (p. 504), although his concept of “music” is decidedly pop-oriented even despite his shift that allows “music” to be what is listened to. Leon Botstein’s “Music of a century: museum culture and the politics of subsidy” (Ch. 2) takes a step back from this millennial standpoint, avoiding the shift, and exposing what had been the price of successful commodification, for in one view “the twentieth century [...] witnessed the death of classical music as an active contemporary cultural form, and its rebirth as a museum catering to a limited public. Those few who seek it out desire a

constructed point of contact with the past, perhaps as a theatrical opportunity for nostalgia, an oblique form of cultural criticism, or merely as entertainment” (p. 49). The idea of a musical museum — and Lydia Goehr must take the lion’s share of credit for having persuaded musicologists to think about this telling image of canonicity — is taken up in Alastair Williams’s “Ageing of the new: the museum of musical modernism” (Ch. 19), although with nothing like the conceptual subtlety to be found in some other places in this book, but rather a stroll past institutions (notably Ircam), “discourses” (actually, journals), and composers hung up to dry through mention of key works and coffee-time commentary (try this: “[Berio’s] affinity with vocal music and gesture [...] guarded against structural obsessions”, p. 515). There are probably better ways to bring the “museum” to life, and in this the early part of the century is well served through Christopher Butler’s “Innovation and the avant-garde, 1900-20” (Ch. 3), one of those contributions that really does fulfil its promise. Butler is of course already an authoritative chronicler of early modernism, but although his position is not new here he adopts it with renewed force. It perhaps amounts to anti-commodification, to adopt a slogan for the convenience of underlining why I mention it at this point. Whereas it is understandably difficult for Blake and Botstein, as discussed above, to present a clear image of just what this phenomenon of “music” is that they are examining in all the proliferating complexities of its commodification, Butler does name that tune, richly and, according to his argument, quite properly canonically (and despite the stylish proliferation through which he inserts little America, popular culture and gender references into his necessarily dead-white-male scenario). He fixes on a specific target, Lawrence Kramer, to run to ground what he calls “reactionary and regressive” “critical-political sermonizing”, which he dislikes, as a champion of early twentieth-century art, because such sermonizing — with which the pages of modern musicological journals positively ripple — fails to “describe the innovative ideas and intentions” of the art “maker”. “Such criticism”, he argues, in contemplating the fashion for finding social and political reference in music, “is always implicitly totalitarian, distrustful of the decency of others, and intolerant of a diversity for which it always sees the same underlying explanation”. The critique is consistent, and explains why he finds Proust or the protagonist of *Erwartung* more interesting than Bergson or Freud’s female patients. Butler’s wider target, however, is the scientific model as a whole, for the simple reason that “artists are not really devoted to a collective and progressive discovery of truth, in which past experiments, made according to superseded paradigms, must be discarded”. Now on the one hand we might find this siren call against theory,

system, even “principles” in understanding art to be refreshing. On the other hand, however, history does move on, tastes do prevail, with clinical inexorability, and we are creatures with an involuntary drive to try to make sense of the past and the powers that shaped it. Is it enough to say of the now-famous musical works premiered in 1913 that “all contribute something permanently valuable to the diverse and pluralist conversation of the concert hall” (p. 85-88, for the above quotations from Butler)?

Most of the contributors to this book would, I sense, answer “no”, even if the commitment to something more systematic than a diverse and pluralist conversation varies in kind and degree. I have already referred to the question of what “music” is supposed to be in this book, and it is on this test that intolerance of diversity (to take up one of Butler’s complaints) can raise its ugly head (if one may be permitted to be intolerant of ugly heads). Some music, after all, is “Music of seriousness and commitment”, according to Michael Walter in his chapter subtitled “the 1930s and beyond” (Ch. 11). What he calls the “new seriousness” of this period was meant “to replace the alleged social irresponsibility of the 1920s” (p. 286), which might be fair enough of some of the trends he discusses, especially when it comes to the Nazis and the Soviets, although Walter seems to somewhat overestimate the ability of repressive government to suppress creative freedom, while underestimating the difference between the utterly vile societies engendered among the German and Russian people and the relatively free air of 1920s America, in which it is hardly subtle to claim that “musical modernism came to be seen as having no value in itself” (p. 292; exactly the opposite societal evaluation provided Schoenberg’s “safety in exile” in the 1930s, referred to by Hermann Danuser in his “Classicism of the inter-war period”, Ch. 10, p. 280). Lack of subtlety reaches its peak in Walter’s chapter with a strange judgement on how its topic came to an end, and this goes to the heart of the question of what “music” was and is: “a new popular music spread worldwide by means of film, radio, and record [...] achieved what serious composers had hoped for in vain: it was heard by millions of people, entertaining and touching them with an emotional authenticity which serious music only rarely managed to evoke. In this way there was, after all, a new musical mainstream, albeit a fast-changing one: popular music” (p. 303).

What is most strange about that sentiment is its notion of what composers of “serious” music hoped for. It has always seemed to me that the kinds of “serious” composers Walter is discussing (commendably enough) — Chavez, Harris, Mascagni, Messiaen, Shostakovich, but many others too — were also serious people who did not seriously envy Glenn Miller his first million-copy recording sale in history. Indeed, one of the crossover features of twentieth-century music

was the yearning of some, perhaps many popular big-hitters for “concert” recognition of their “serious” music, composers like Leonard Bernstein and Bernard Herrmann, who one might say, if a bit whimsically, longed to be heard and thought of for just one night as kinds of Schoenberg, by some small, warm, acculturalized audience. Indeed the balance between popular and serious is an issue threaded throughout this history and always in danger, as most of its authors are aware, of being a shibboleth diverting our attention from sounder distinctions.

If this contemplation of the *History* as history has seemed to be teasing out what is withheld rather than recognizing what is offered, this is not of course to deny the very richness of the enterprise, which is well worth celebrating as a constellation of shafts through the century. The view from the non-West, as it might be thought of, is represented in chapters by Jonathan Stock on the Western impact on other music (Ch.1) and in the closing Ch. 22 by Martin Scherzinger on “Art’ music in a cross-cultural context: the case of Africa”. Popular and traditional music is explored, as well as being broached continually elsewhere of course, in Susan Cook’s “Flirting with the vernacular: America in Europe, 1900-45” (Ch. 6), Mervyn Cooke’s “After swing: modern jazz and its impact” (Ch. 15), Robynn Stilwell’s “Music of the youth revolution: rock through the 1960s” (Ch. 16), and Dai Griffiths’ rich and penetrating contribution on “History and class consciousness: pop music towards 2000” (Ch. 21). Another thread running through the *History* is more overt in the titles, Joseph Auner’s “Proclaiming a mainstream: Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern” (Ch. 9), Derek B. Scott’s “Other mainstreams: light music and easy listening, 1920-70” (Ch. 12), Arnold Whittall’s “Individualism and accessibility: the moderate mainstream, 1945-75” (Ch. 14) and Robert Fink’s “(Post-)minimalisms 1970-2000: the search for a new mainstream” (Ch. 20), and for good measure I would include in this thread James Lincoln Collier’s “Classic jazz to 1945” (Ch. 5), not least because “mainstream” composers and performers — however we are going to navigate that taxonomic minefield — were well aware of and often deeply impacted by jazz, which taking the very long view we might well think of as the really new cultural phenomenon of the early part of the period. Peter Franklin’s “Between the wards: traditions, modernisms, and the ‘little people from the suburbs’” (Ch. 7) also hovers somewhere in that historiographical milieu. So actually does Stephen Banfield’s “Music, text and stage: the tradition of bourgeois tonality to the Second World War” (Ch. 4), which is incidentally a model of lucid story-telling and one of the patches in this *History* that one can genuinely call the finest of writing. Now without wanting to turn this into a shoddy game, it would nevertheless be interesting for the reader

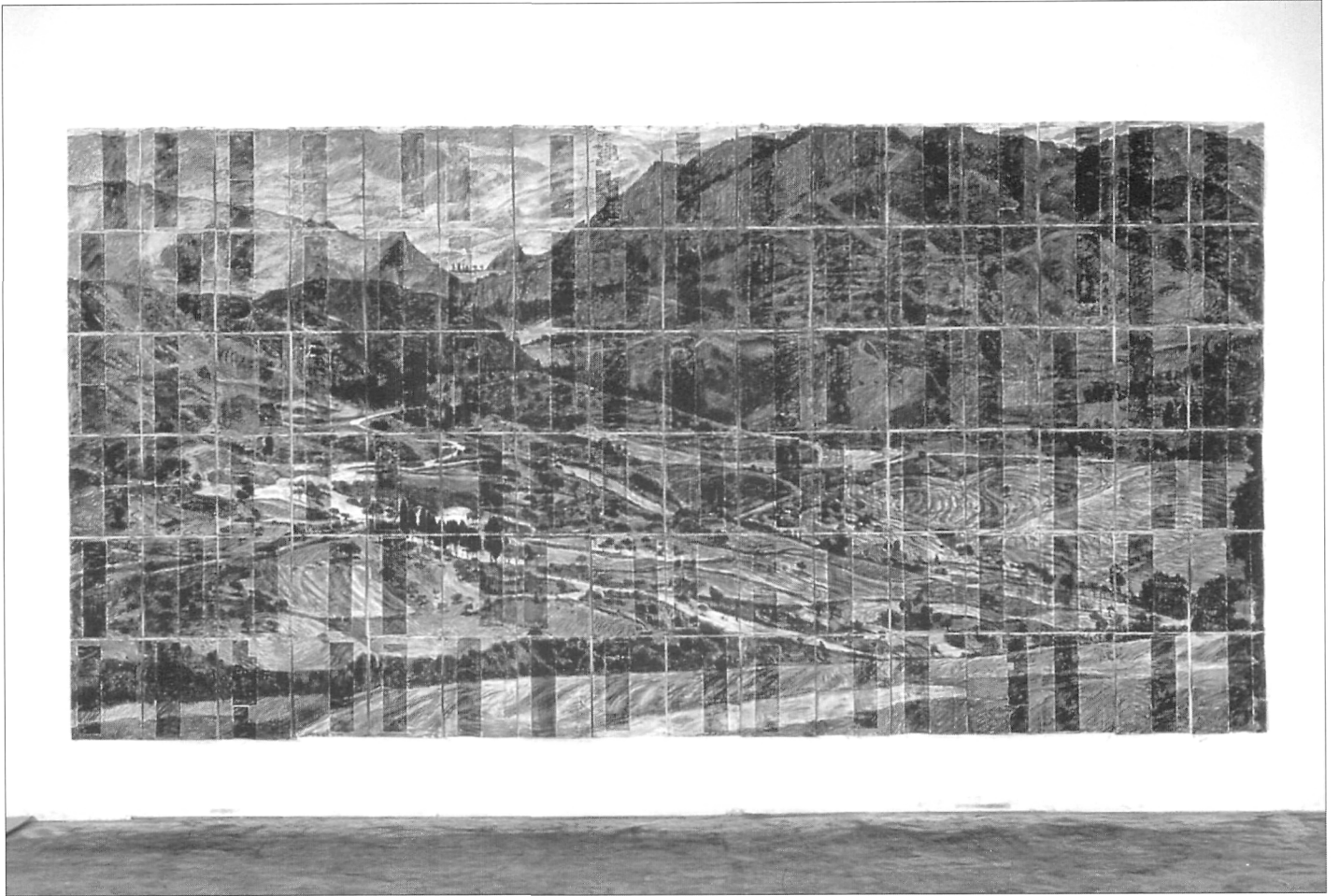
unacquainted with this *History* but acquainted with twentieth-century music to be asked at this point: anything missing (in so far as it is at all fair or useful to try to gain a conspectus of such a deep and fertile resource through its stated topics)? It would be, presumably, the avant-garde, already mentioned above from Christopher Butler's discussion of the first two decades: the follow-up is in Chs 8, 13 and 17, David Nicholls' "Brave new worlds: experimentalism between the wars", David Osmond-Smith's "New beginnings: the international avant-garde, 1945-62" and Richard Toop's "Expanding horizons: the international avant-garde, 1962-75".

To add a little grist to the mill, beyond some of the tectonic issues that I have tried to capture above, consider only the role of theory in Cook and Pople's century of music. Virtually non-existent. The overall account offered here of serialism is a litmus test (but there are certainly other tests from the music-theory perspective). You would have thought that one key feature of twentieth-century music was its much chattered about cerebral or constructivist attitude of many "classical" composers and, I believe, executants, producers and promoters, and possibly even several generations of (select) audiences. I am not even saying whether this was a good or a bad thing, so at least on this I can out of expediency rather than belief briefly join the politically correct music historians of the 1980s and 90s in not expressing any opinion whatever. But I am saying that it happened, and that it seeped into very many aspects of all kinds of music in the last century. If you can find this reflected in the *History*, you're a much closer reader than I. Incidentally, even *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory* (2002, to which this writer contributed) is notably light on the twentieth century. Perhaps this is all part of the century's malaise, with which we still find difficulty in coping as historians: even its pervasive, self-conscious and, many would say, culturally intrusive habit of theorizing still seems to make us uncomfortable, like a bad memory; maybe, as some musicologists are beginning to dare to say, and as may well be in tune with what is going on around us in culture and society, the twentieth century is a phenomenon that future generations are going to want to forget, indeed are going to need to forget.

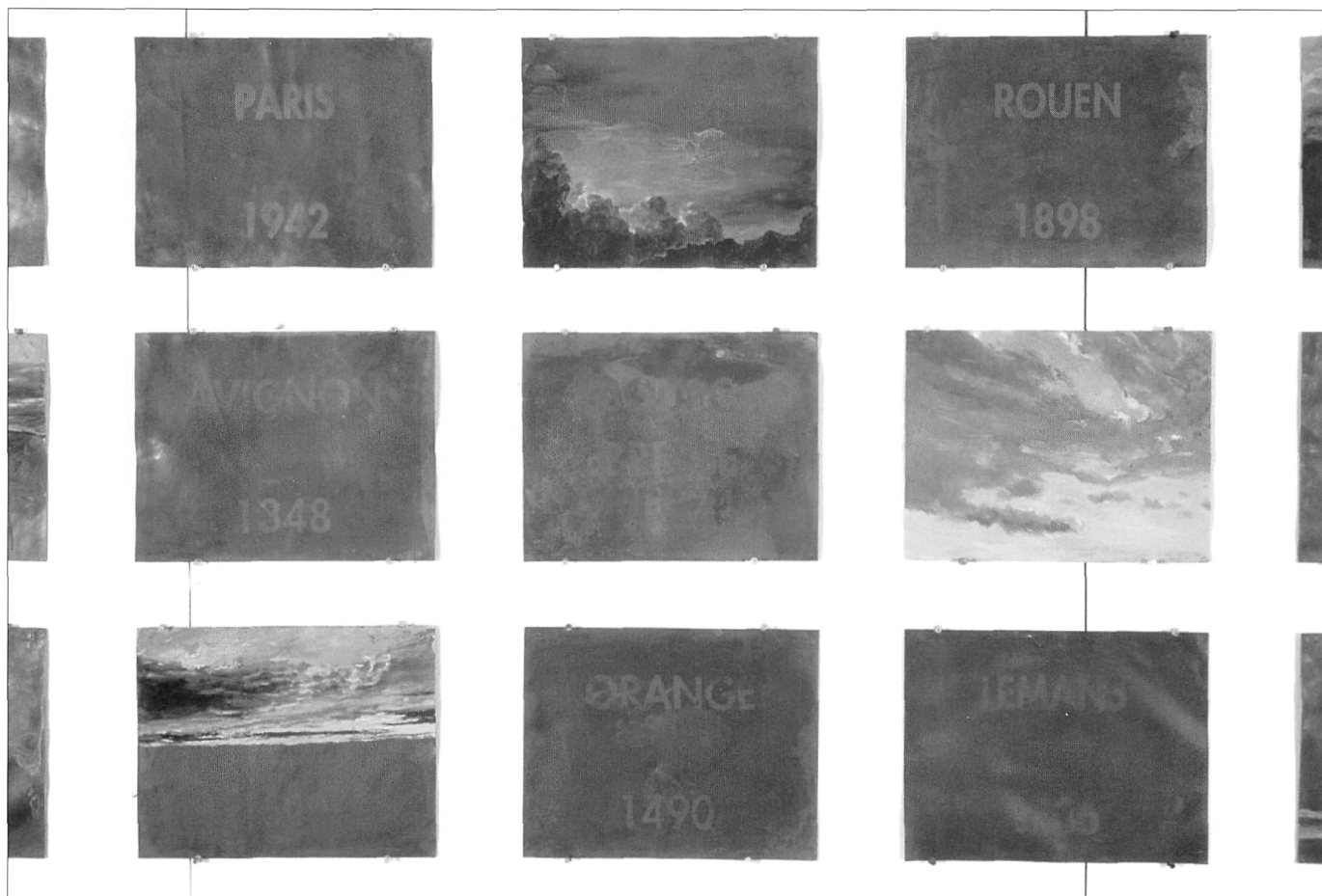
If the analogy with new, English, demythologized Freud discussed at the beginning of this essay is anything to go by, I see the *History* as some kind of obverse that can be understood as a response to collective unease. What it appears to do, and perhaps to be trying to do, is to *mythologize* a century of music. In that sense its authorial voice, which obviously cannot be equivalent to that of a Taruskin or, in earlier times, of an Austin since it is multi-authored, is rather that of a powerful regime than a commanding person, and so perhaps



correspondingly more disconcerting: an invitation to the “reader to make his or her own sense of the music of a century” is in the end covertly authoritarian rather than transparently interpretive — please feel free to choose, it smiles, but of course only from what we decide to offer you. The editors are right, in my view, that “the book arguably ends up constructing a grand narrative of its own [charting] a transition between two quite different conceptions of ‘our’ music: on the one hand, the Western ‘art’ tradition [...] and on the other hand, a global, post-colonial culture” (p. 8-9), and if that is what their authors think, the editors would say, then so be it. It will be for a future generation to explain if and how, in its view at least, actually twentieth-century music was not really like the neo-orthodox scenario outlined at Cambridge in the early twenty-first.



*Le Chant de la Terre (hommage à Y. G.), 2004*



*Ciel de plomb, 1992-2005, détail*