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Griffiths on Modern Music

Paul Griffiths, *A Concise History of Modern Music from Debussy to Boulez* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), £5.50

—, *Modern Music: the Avant Garde since 1945* (London: J. M. Dent, 1981), £15.00

When I set out to read and review these books I admit that I had no very clear idea as to what might be Paul Griffiths's purpose in writing them or who might be intended to read them. I can now report that the *Concise History* is directed at the layman and *Modern Music* at the more sophisticated reader, but I am no nearer to being convinced of the need for such surveys as these. They seem to spring from the unstated (but nonetheless pervasive) conviction that the music of this century requires explication as an aid to its 'appreciation'—a peculiarly 19th-century attitude that recalls the predilection of that period for programmatic adjuncts to musical works.

Historical surveys inevitably tend to reflect the subjective viewpoint of their authors, even when the passage of time has largely purged the debate of personal loyalties and sympathies; but the contemporary historian has to struggle to disentangle fact from wishful thinking, to avoid polemics that seek to assert the supremacy of one school of thought over its rivals, and to guard against a preoccupation with novelty, which is often well-nigh impossible to distinguish from substance—and all this without the benefit of the *cordon sanitaire* of time. At best, it seems to me, all that can be achieved is a provisional catalogue of recurrent ideas and a listing of those composers generally judged to be important. To attempt to draw conclusions about the reasons for their importance and to distinguish lines of development on the basis of information, the value of which we are simply not in a position to assess, seems to be courting disaster. That Griffiths, particularly in *Modern Music*, essays both tasks—expository and judgmental—gives a curiously uneven quality to these books. He leaves himself open to criticism not only concerning whom he includes and whom he omits, but also, and more important, the criteria on which he bases the connections he perceives between composers.

The *Concise History of Modern Music* lays no claim to be other than a very general introduction to the topic. Essentially descriptive, it makes frequent reference to the artistic milieu of a period to underline the observations on its music; the illustrations, if somewhat familiar, are generally appropriate. Choosing Debussy's *L'après-midi d'un faune* as a convenient starting-point, Griffiths singles out features that he sees as demonstrating a fundamental

break with 'tradition'. Repeatedly, in both books, we are brought back to this 'fact' of revolution against the accepted norm (the shadow of Boulez is never wholly absent), though neither its validity nor the pre-conceptions it imposes is ever questioned. Beyond a few mild protestations that Webern never intended his music to be regarded as pointing the way towards 'total' serialism, Griffiths never pauses to inquire what happens if you extrapolate from a coherent musical work a group of independently observed criteria concerning, for example, duration, apply them unilaterally in a systematised way, and leave them to fight it out with other equally 'logically' derived organisations. The concept of 'serial logic' is swallowed whole without any attempt to relate it to musical logic. This leads easily to an acceptance of the idea that the integration of serial systems for pitch and duration (whether on an arithmetical or proportional basis) is both desirable and an aid to comprehension. While one cannot lay the blame for this misconception wholly on Griffiths it is unfortunate that such hoary old fables should be perpetuated in a book with a 'popular' slant.

The links between the two books are not confined to their joint endorsement of the common 20th-century myths; *Modern Music* displays an uncomfortably close relationship, both in style and sequence of ideas, to the latter part of the *Concise History*, and I was surprised to discover that the family likeness even extends to the author's Boulez volume.¹ The *Concise History* mentions George Rochberg as an example of a composer who has rejected many facets of 20th-century music and has created a style reminiscent of late Beethoven; *Modern Music* also refers to Rochberg, who could hardly be called a representative of the avant garde, and this is the more inappropriate as there is no mention of Carter after a brief note on his First Quartet and Lutosławski is dispatched with an equal paucity of detail.

There is a certain lack of discrimination and a sense of proportion in Griffiths's coverage, no attempt to suggest relativities or relevances. In his effort to attain what he regards as a degree of comprehensiveness Griffiths treats us to a seemingly endless disquisition on minor American tape works, without a hint that they are comparatively unimportant. The great virtue of the Americans seems to be their rigorous systematicness: 'That eight bars of music may demonstrate so much organization is some measure of Babbitt's ability to make everything in his compositions serve a constructive function.' (p.40, referring to the opening of the *Three Compositions for Piano*). But in my view the completeness of the system is often in inverse proportion to the musical value of the composition—it is undeniable that the audible processes of Reich have a much more 'musically' conceived structure.

The division of *Modern Music* into two parts—1945 to 1960 and the 1960s and 1970s—is underscored by a shift from a chronological presentation in the first part to one determined by aesthetic considerations and genre in the second. There is much less discussion of technical feature (not structural, technical) in the second part, except in those cases (for example, Stockhausen's *Mantra*) where the composer himself has provided detailed comments (there is also a section on Boulez's *Éclat* and *Rituel*, again drawn from Griffiths's Boulez book). This emphasises the fact that the majority of the detailed commentary in the first half is culled from the work of others (all duly acknowledged), the author seeking simply to present the material to its best advantage. These borrowings cause occasional stylistic problems and duplications;

they also result in linking passages of a rather obvious kind: 'Total serialism had become, if only for a short period, the most pressing necessity for composers of Boulez's generation, and it was in Darmstadt in July 1951, as Schoenberg lay dying on the other side of the Atlantic, that some of the crucial first steps were taken.' (p.46) In general, however, the writing is efficient and clear, though the ambiguous description of Gordon Mumma's *Hornpipe* (1967) is enough to goad Mrs Whitehouse into action were a public performance planned: '*Hornpipe* . . . requires the player, on horn, to wear a "cybersonic console"' (p.175).

I found reading these two books a rather depressing experience: far from encouraging me to listen to the music under discussion, they had the effect of distancing the subject matter and divorcing it from the concrete musical experience. There are other books that address the same topics (for example, Arnold Whittall's *Music since the First World War*) but seem to me to broach the problems Griffiths avoids, reaching beyond catalogues of techniques and neat encapsulations of style to deal with the music directly. Perhaps Griffiths would argue that this was never his intention: to me there doesn't seem much point in doing anything else—except of course listen to the music.

¹ Paul Griffiths, *Boulez*, Oxford Studies of Composers, 16 (London: Oxford University Press, 1978).

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