

Editorial: Twentieth-Century Music – Plural

Difference is among the twentieth century's most volatile legacies to the twenty-first. Over this period it has increasingly lodged itself in our cultural consciousness, as both theoretical concept and lived experience. Its workings are refracted through culture (through phenomena such as music) and the way we contemplate and study it (through a journal such as this). A Brief History of Difference, at least the chapter relevant to the present story, might start in the early part of the last century with Ferdinand de Saussure's courses on linguistics. Not only language, but potentially all signifying phenomena, Saussure argued, articulate the world for us by cutting it into units (e.g. phonemes, concepts, words, signs) that carry meaning precisely through being differentiated from one another: reality is rendered as a system of mutually conditioning differences. By mid-century these ideas had become decisive for literary and cultural theory under the banner of structuralism and semiotics, in which even a cultural practice such as fashion could be seen to signify as a system of difference. With the rise of poststructuralism and deconstruction, difference (or *différance*) was again seminal in debates about the very nature of meaning, which in turn informed later twentieth-century cultural politics of class and society, gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity. (As we know, all these movements would also in the end, and no less contentiously, make their mark on musicology.) Most recently – in terms far from academic – cultural difference has moved into the foreground of global consciousness with the literally shattering and explosive events of our new century.

Is it going too far to invoke this politically conditioned history as a background to (or frame around) the contents of a scholarly music journal? The resonances are there. *twentieth-century music* could have settled for comfortable retrospective musings on a high modernist or avant garde repertory, tidily demarcated by the calendar. Instead it has chosen not to 'exclude any style/genre/category/use of twentieth-century music' – as Christopher Mark and Allan Moore put it in their inaugural editorial. And so it is hoped that 'the contiguity of divergent topics in each issue . . . will stimulate the creation of new perspectives'.¹ Through a policy of non-exclusion and its openness to diversity, the journal can be seen, then, positively to embrace difference, and this is certainly in evidence in the following pages. Alongside investigations of composers and works from the modernist canon there are studies of the poetics of film music and the consumption of world music. (Plans to include an article on popular music, which would have made for still greater variegation, had to be shelved for this issue, owing to the vicissitudes of an already over-running production schedule; but the commitment to the vernacular as an essential part of twentieth-century music remains, and will, we hope, emerge as a conspicuous part of the journal's profile over future issues.) Also salient in the present issue is the range of modes and methodologies of enquiry, amounting to a snapshot (admittedly contingent and partial) of the heterogeneous world of present-day musicology. These include, or make reference to, music analysis, aesthetics, hermeneutics, interdisciplinary cultural theory, intradisciplinary critical musicology, ethnomusicology,

¹ *twentieth-century music* 1/1 (March 2004), 3–4 (3).

and even what could be termed ‘post-critical’ inquiry. And authors’ concerns encompass not only musical and other aesthetic objects but also the subjectivities of listening, interpretation, and writing.

A receptiveness to difference would seem to go hand-in-hand with the promotion of *pluralism*. Hence while the journal’s title is couched in the singular, it none the less seeks to connote twentieth-century music in the plural (one possible reading of the lower-case orthography), rather than the art-music canon that, until recently in some quarters, the term has been assumed more or less exclusively to signify. To the charge that the title should then have been, more accurately, *twentieth-century musics*, might come the counter-argument that the many musical manifestations of the period ought none the less still to be considered as parts of a historical phenomenon that on some level remains a unity. These are radically different conceptions of plurality, and here is not the place to arbitrate between them. But it is to be hoped that over its life the journal will provide a forum for debating issues of exactly such historiographic (and, as is argued here, political) import.

Aspirations to pluralism also reflect a spirit of *inclusiveness* that we can see emerging within parts of the West at its present historical conjuncture, the turn from the twentieth to the twenty-first century (taking a non-literal view of its own title, the journal also includes the latter within its purview). But if in some way this could also be seen to connect with discourses about *democracy*, we might ask whether its pursuit in the academic sphere will be as turbulent as its corresponding prosecution within the realm of global politics. By curious synchronicity, there is discernible within this issue of *tcm* a ‘contiguity . . . of topics’, as well as of authors, that establish the UK, the US, ‘old’ Europe, and the theme of globalization as coordinates within its discursive terrain. Thankfully, the relations of difference here are of a different order from the tensions of the contemporary international political scene; nevertheless, one corollary of the journal’s inclusivist policy is that it is permeable to polemics that exercise the discipline as a whole.

Consider the case of Darmstadt, a musical institution that has exerted significant cultural-critical force, and that has been frequently taken as iconic of musical modernism after the second world war. For these reasons Darmstadt-school (or Darmstadt-like) composers and aesthetic principles have also been singled out in subsequent waves of postmodern counter-criticism, not least within the so-called ‘new musicology’, as proxies for the putative sins of modernism in general. The screw turns further within these pages, in a counter-counter-critique that, among other things, criticizes new-musicological critics for their own supposed shortfalls in self-reflexivity: that is, for their alleged failure to recognize the representational biases of anglophone accounts of modernism, which they thus perpetuate. Wherever individuals choose to position themselves within such debates, here is a salutary reminder that our perceptions of twentieth-century music are shaped by our critical and historiographic traditions. This, then, is another locus of difference. Your Darmstadt (or your understanding of modernism) may diverge from mine because of the way accounts have been transmitted to us; let us not mistake our locally conditioned knowledge for universal truth. To suggest another example (and risk further polemic), could it not be instructive to consider to what extent the postmodern turn of the new musicology is a discourse in an American dialect

(distinct from, say, critical musicology in the UK, and critical theory within Western and Central Europe), its agenda conditioned by certain local difficulties within the US academy? To look at matters this way might modify perceptions of the movement without seeking to undermine its work. On the one hand, this might help loosen the grip of what arguably risks becoming another kind of hegemony. On the other hand, it might also encourage critics to give the movement's protagonists their due – to recognize that their productive challenges to the discipline have required considerable integrity, and have sometimes been undertaken at personal cost within the politics of their localities.

All of which should remind us that differences between our musical preferences and epistemological orientations, including those expressed within this journal, are not arbitrary or indeterminate, notwithstanding the role of contingency in bringing them together. These amount to differences in values, in ideology, conditioned by differences in situation. The music and epistemologies that I value are not a matter of *indifference* to me, nor yours to you. But unless (to twist a notion from Habermas) we want to settle for a situation of non-communicative non-interaction, we should equally not be indifferent to one another; and it is here that the will to universalize starts to creep back in, with as much potential for conflict as for consensus. For what I find valuable in my musical understanding is so precisely because I perceive this as not reducible to my self – in other words, as not only subjective. But, given that the same also goes for you, our respective projections of our values and beliefs back out into the social world may be jarringly non-congruent.

Given the contemporary proliferation of musics and ideas, how do we deal with the pluralism of our times – with its anxieties as well as its vibrancy? Rhetorically (i.e. with an awareness of the artificiality of binarisms), we might contrast two possible models, which, not coincidentally, resonate with corresponding political theorizations of cultural difference.²

One model available to us is that of *liberal pluralism* and its associated principle of *value pluralism*. This is a polity which, in William A. Galston's analysis, 'will organize itself around the principle of maximum feasible accommodation of diverse legitimate ways of life, limited only by the minimum requirements of civic unity. This principle expresses (and requires) the practice of tolerance – the conscientious reluctance to act in ways that impede others from living in accordance with their various conceptions of what gives life meaning and worth.'³ While Galston's account itself does not explore how musical or academic engagement would function under such a principle, it is not too difficult to see how these instances of what liberals call 'expressive liberty' could be couched: in short, we are each free to practise and value whichever musics we choose, and, if it pleases us, to discourse about them under whatever value system we choose, provided we do not violate civic or (by analogy) institutional unity. Under such a regime, holders of differing aesthetic or intellectual mores may recognize each others' existence, may enter into dialogue with one another, or may co-exist

2 Perhaps no less coincidentally, this construction also echoes conclusions drawn by Kevin Korsyn in his recent book, *Decentering Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); see especially chapter 8 (176–88).

3 William A. Galston, *Liberal Pluralism: the Implications of Value Pluralism for Political Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 119.

in disagreement or disapproval, provided each party abides by a minimal social or institutional understanding not to violate, or limit the freedom of expression of, any other, to whom the same conditions apply. (In some ways this suggests a kind of background neutrality that is possibly also implicit in Mark and Moore's image of a 'contiguity of divergent topics'.) This blueprint necessarily has no positive epistemological foundation, for the very act of theorizing one would be to privilege a particular form of discourse (Reason) – and so run counter to the very principles that define value pluralism. The characteristics of this polity, then, are those of *pragmatism*. The question is whether such a philosophy offers sufficient theoretical support or depth (the latter a conceit which liberal philosophers such as Richard Rorty might of course reject as metaphysical) to bear the weight of fraught epistemological complexity that a pluralist ethic brings.

An alternative model for dealing with difference is offered by theories of *radical democracy*, whose most notable exponents include Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Slavoj Žižek. Given earlier comments, it is worth noting the different cultural and intellectual pedigrees of these models: the one anglophone (or, more precisely, British/North Atlantic), the liberal traditions of, for example, Isaiah Berlin and John Rawls; the other more rooted in continental European traditions. If the disposition of liberal pluralism is characterized by tolerance, its counterpart in radical democracy is *antagonism*, or more precisely, *agonism* – which, among other things, brings the notion of adverseriality out from under the carpet of democratic values. Mouffe offers one of the more straightforward expositions of these ideas in her book *The Democratic Paradox*, where she asserts: 'One of the keys to the thesis of agonistic pluralism is that, far from jeopardizing democracy, agonistic confrontation is in fact its very condition of existence. Modern democracy's specificity lies in the recognition and legitimation of conflict and the refusal to suppress it by imposing an authoritarian order.'⁴

This model, then, eschews notions of harmoniousness, and instead embraces abrasive encounters as inevitable, even desirable. Whereas liberal pluralists ultimately take their premises as a pragmatic given, and hence leave them theoretically underdetermined, proponents of radical democracy seem to incline toward theoretical overdetermination.⁵ This may well be because their ideas are explicitly founded on an impossibility, namely that of representing society as a *totality*. As Mouffe puts it: 'the democratic character of society can only be given by the fact that no limited social actor can attribute to herself or himself the representation of the totality and claim to have the "mastery" of the foundation'.⁶ (Applied to our own context, this might be read as the impossibility of representing the totality of the many different musics we encounter in our contemporary culture as an integrated social whole.) If such realizations are uncomfortable, their apologists see them as none the less constitutive of democracy.

4 Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), 103.

5 Compare, for example, the tenor of Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), with the Hegelian and Lacanian terms of reference found in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London and New York: Verso, 2000).

6 Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 100.

This is not the occasion to foreclose discussion as to which of these models offers the more useful way forward, nor to rule out the possibility of, and need for, alternatives. But what is worth noting is that these ways of thinking through the apparent intractabilities of difference in the aesthetic and epistemological sphere are of a piece with approaches in the wider political sphere; the connection is more than metaphorical. Of course, the fact that, in contrast to the domain of international politics, there is no corresponding likelihood of actual blood on the floor (at worst this may be only of the metaphorical variety) might make these issues seem no more important than armchair speculations. On the other hand, there is the faint hope that by publicly negotiating frameworks for pluralism and difference within our symbolic practices, we might also gain insights that are not wholly irrelevant to wider cultural and political a(nta)gonisms. Here, then, we might glimpse ways in which to be academic is to be far from academic.

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