**Modernism and Popular Music**

Stephen Gibson

Modernism has an uneasy relationship with popular music and popular culture in general. Many modernist music movements (e.g. the twelve-tone school of Schoenberg) are diametrically opposed to popular music in both form and aesthetic. Though hardly uniform its attitude to popular culture, certain strains of modernist thought (e.g. the Frankfurt school, and especially Adorno) have also vilified the use of popular culture references in modernist practices. Despite the above, several modernist composers from Stravinsky to Philip Glass have used popular music forms such as jazz and rock in their works. In a rather more remarkable turn of events, modernist and experimental music techniques have had a profound influence on various popular forms including free jazz, experimental rock and ‘electronica.’

Numerous modernist composers were exposed to jazz in the 1920s, culminating in series of modernist-jazz hybrids including Milhaud’s *The Creation of the World* (1923) and Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924). Stravinsky famously wrote the *Ebony Concerto* (1946) for jazz clarinetist Woody Herman. Later modernist composers including Louis Andriessen and Michael Nyman incorporated jazz as part of their on-going musical language, creating a new form of large chamber music that merged the jazz ensemble and the small orchestra.

A sustained relationship between modernist experimentalism and popular music was established in the 1950s and 60s. This connection can be primarily attributed to two factors: the establishment of free jazz by musicians such as Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane, and the influence of the avant-garde on the Beatles through John Lennon’s association with Yoko Ono.

### Free jazz used more complex meters than traditional jazz and employed pantonal and atonal harmonic languages directly linked to similar modernist experiments. Classic free jazz albums include Ornette Coleman’s *Free Jazz: A Collective Improvisation* (1960),John Coltrane's *Ascension* (1965) and offshoots such as Miles Davis’ *Bitches Brew* (1971). Davis was deeply influenced by ‘Elektronische Musik’ and Stockhausen, and much of his work in the 1970s uses avant-gardetechniques. Later artists who explored free jazz include John Zorn, who used jarring juxtapositions within semi-improvised settings, as heard in *Naked City* (1990).

The avant-garde of the 1960s had a deep effect on the rock music of the era, including The Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), which used tape-editing techniques similar to musique concrète. The Beatles’ experimentalism reached its peak on *The White Album* (1968) most notably on *Revolution 9*, a track that eschewed the normal verse-chorus structures of pop music and instead based its form and sound on collage. Around the same time a number of musicians in the US and Europe began to fuse the avant-garde with rock forms. Chief among those were Frank Zappa, an ardent admirer of Boulez who recorded a series of experimental rock albums with *The Mothers of Invention*, and The Velvet Underground, who had a direct link to minimalist composer La Monte Young through their violist/bassist John Cale. The Velvet Underground had a particularly lasting influence on experimental rock, primarily through their use of drones and noise within relatively constrained pop music forms.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s there was an explosion of experimental rock, including several German bands such as Can, Neu! and Faust. Two members of Can (Holger Czukay and Irmin Schmidt) had studied with Stockhausen and they brought his tape editing techniques and improvisational ideas to a rock form. Between 1969 and 1974 Can released an astonishing body of avant-garde rock that is unique in both its sustained experimentalism and its adherence to funk-rock rhythms. Their *Tago Mago* (1971) is considered by many to be the best experimental rock album ever recorded. Simultaneously, groups such as King Crimson, Henry Cow and Soft Machine also produced a number of albums fusing rock, free jazz and the avant-garde, and a number of modernist composers began using some rock timbres and techniques in their work, including Philip Glass in *Einstein on the Beach* (1975-76).

With the advent of punk in 1977, its general insistence on adhering to the basics of rock curtailed the influence of the avant-garde within rock music; however, towards the end of the 1980s a number of ‘electronica’ artists began to appear. Many of these artists referred to 1970s experiments with ‘ambient’ electronics including those of Tangerine Dream and Brian Eno, but also to minimalist composers, John Cage and stochastic techniques. Chief among those were Autechre, who fused dance-based electronica with minimalism and have used algorithmic techniques in their more recent work, and Aphex Twin who combined ambient music with dance-music and notably collaborated with Philip Glass on *Donkey Rhubarb* (1995). Parallel to these developments a new form called Japanese Noise Music integrated experimental rock, free jazz, noise with the electronic avant-garde. The results were often extreme, as exemplified by the work of Merzbow who famously released a punishing 50-CD box set entitled *Merzbox.*

The electronica and noise music of the 1990s produced an explosion of experimental popular music similar in impact to that of the 1970s. This continued in the new millennium with musicians such as Fennesz, David Sylvian and Björk. The fusion of avant-garde experimentalism and popular music has now become so complete that it is not an exaggeration to say that musicians working in popular experimental forms are now continuing the work of the avant-garde more visibly than ‘classical’ composers coming from a more traditional modernist perspective.

Essential listening:

1. George Gershwin, *Rhapsody in Blue*, <http://www.last.fm/music/George+Gershwin/American+Legends+17>

2. Igor Stravinsky, *Ebony Concerto*, <http://www.last.fm/music/Igor+Stravinsky/Stravinsky:+Symphony+In+Three+Movements+&+Ebony+Conerto>

3. John Coltrane, *Ascension*, <http://www.last.fm/music/John+Coltrane/Ascension>

4. Miles Davis, *Bitches Brew,* <http://www.last.fm/music/Miles+Davis/Bitches+Brew>

5. The Beatles, *The White Album,* <http://www.last.fm/music/The+Beatles/The+White+Album>

6. Frank Zappa, *Freak Out,* <http://www.last.fm/music/Frank+Zappa/Freak+Out>!

7. The Velvet Underground, *The Velvet Underground and Nico,* <http://www.last.fm/music/The+Velvet+Underground/The+Velvet+Underground+&+Nico>

8. Soft Machine, *Volumes One and Two,* <http://www.last.fm/music/Soft+Machine/Volumes+One+&+Two>

9. Can, *Tago Mago,* <http://www.last.fm/music/Can/Tago+Mago>

10. Tangerine Dream, *Phaedra,* <http://www.last.fm/music/Tangerine+Dream/Phaedra>

11. Philip Glass, *Einstein on the Beach,* <http://www.last.fm/music/Von+Rosenthal+de+la+Vegaz/Nuit+Classique>

12. Louis Andriessen, *De Stijl,* <http://www.last.fm/music/Louis+Andriessen/De+Stijl;+M+is+for+Man,+Music,+Mozart>

# 13. Autechre, *Tri Repetae++*

<http://www.last.fm/music/Autechre/Tri+Repetae%252B%252B+%28disc+2%29>

14. Aphex Twin, *Donkey Rhubarb,* <http://www.last.fm/music/Aphex+Twin/Donkey+Rhubarb>

15. Merzbow, *1930,* <http://www.last.fm/music/Merzbow/1930>

16. Fennesz, *Endless Summer,* <http://www.last.fm/music/Fennesz/Endless+Summer>

17. David Sylvian, *Blemish,* <http://www.last.fm/music/David+Sylvian/Blemish>

18. Björk, *Volta*, <http://www.last.fm/music/Björk/Volta>

Further Reading:

Adorno, T.W. (1991) *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture,* Edited with an Introduction by J.M. Bernstein, London: Routledge.

This collection of Adorno’s writings from earlier in the 20th Century provides a critical view of popular culture, and engages in a critique of modernist composers who used popular forms.

# Halliwell, M. and Hagerty, P. (2011) *Beyond and Before: Progressive Rock Since the 1960s*, New York: Continuum Publishing Corporation.

This volume provides a contemporary view of experimental and progressive rock and is an excellent scholarly introduction to the form.

# Jost, E. (1974) *Free Jazz (The Roots of Jazz),* Da Capo Press.

This is a first-rate general introduction to the free jazz of the 50s, 60s and early 70s.