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Darmstadt and the Institutionalisation of Modernism

Christopher Fox

The practice of new music composition, performance and education in the Darmstadt courses, and the extent to which this practice then served as a model for the development of new music institutions in the United Kingdom and the USA, is discussed. Various critiques of modernist music offered in the 1990s are also considered, particularly those related to ideas of a 'new tonality'; it is argued that a re-examination of the music of the Darmstadt School reveals a greater diversity than its monolithic representation in music history might suggest and that such a re-examination presents the most satisfactory response to these anti-modernist critiques.

Keywords: Darmstadt; Modernism; Serialism; Jazz; New tonality

First of all, a familiar story:

> Once upon a time a group of composers gathered in Darmstadt, listened to the late works of Webern and invented a compositional technique called 'total serialism'. With this technique they wrote music without tonality, melody, rhythm or harmony. This music was more modern than any other and so these composers were crowned Princes of Modernism and their palace was called Darmstadt. Other composers came to Darmstadt to become modern and any composer who refused to use the Darmstadt techniques was driven out of the palace.

Like most myths, the 'Darmstadt' myth offers an attractive simplification of a complex set of circumstances; like most myths, the people at its centre have played an active role in its development. The myth of 1950s Darmstadt has also been overwritten by the subsequent history of the Ferienkurse and, particularly in Anglo-American perceptions, by the close affiliation in the 1980s between Darmstadt and the so-called new complexity, the first time since the 1950s that British and American composers played a sustainedly significant role in the Ferienkurse. For the purposes of this article, however, I will use the term 'Darmstadt' to mean those composers

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whose music was identified as epitomising 'the Darmstadt School' in Luigi Nono's essay 'The Development of Serial Technique' (Nono, 1958)—in other words, Boulez, Maderna, Stockhausen and Nono himself—during the period between 1950 (the premiere of the *Variazioni Canoniche* of Nono) and 1960 (the last year in which all the members of the 'Schule' participated in the Ferienkurse).

I want to propose three arguments: first, that there is evidence that a modernist orthodoxy became predominant in the institutional support for new music in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, and that the model for this orthodoxy stemmed from Darmstadt; second, that in the 1990s the reaction against modernism in music also became an orthodoxy; but, third, that the bases of these orthodoxies lie in a mythic representation of Darmstadt, which is at odds with the experience of much of the music of Darmstadt. As a musician who has been based in Britain for most of my life, I want to locate these arguments within the context of English (that is, American and British) writing about music so that we can see how ideas derived from music can be refracted by different cultural contexts. In the mid-1990s I wrote in *Von Kranichstein zur Gegenwart*[1] about the role of British musicians in the Ferienkurse; here I will briefly summarise some of that material before going on to trace the role of Darmstadt-derived ideas about new music in British musical institutions.

When I first presented a German-language version of these ideas on 2 March 1998 as part of the conference 'Neue Musik in Darmstadt', organised by the Musikwissenschaftliches Institut, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität, Mainz, I asked my audience rhetorically why these arguments should be the business of a conference on Darmstadt and musicology. I justified myself by suggesting that they needed to be considered because musicology, musicologists and students of musicology are perpetually caught between the complexities of individual musical experiences—how does *this* listener understand *this* work in *this* performance?—and the tradition of the 'grand narratives' of music history, the orthodoxies that organise the complexities of real experience into the simplifications of linear histories. Today we can think about the music of 1950s Darmstadt as music, by returning to the aural experience of that music in performance, or as a set of abstractions, which tells us something about the music but more about the cultural histories which have formed since that music was first created. I am interested in both and I am interested too in the dissonance between the music and the abstractions which have grown up around it.

From the beginning of the Ferienkurse, the British composers who were drawn to Darmstadt tended to be those most committed to modernist ideas about music. At the end of the 1940s came Humphrey Searle and Peter Racine Fricker, then through the 1950s Alexander Goehr, Richard Rodney Bennett, Cornelius Cardew, Peter Maxwell Davies, Harrison Birtwistle and, by the beginning of the 1960s, Bernard Rands. All were composers whose music was already deemed radical against the background of the 'English' national music tradition established by Vaughan Williams and Holst. Many had already chosen to study on the continent—Searle with

Webern, Goehr with Messiaen, Maxwell Davies with Petrassi—and for all of them Darmstadt represented a musical position in terms of which they would define themselves as composers. Goehr, for example, has said, 'I had never entirely been at ease with what was going on at Darmstadt . . . I agreed with the way they delineated the problems; I did not always agree with the solutions'. Goehr also reports that Nono 'had rather made me feel that I should not stay in England; that the situation was not right for the music I wanted to write' (Northcott, 1980, pp. 14–15).

That the English musical establishment regarded this continental drift as a disturbing development is evident in interviews that Benjamin Britten gave in the early 1960s. Britten observed, 'I think there is a snobbery of enormous pretensions connected with the most recent trends in music. People in this country who thought Schoenberg was mad until recently have suddenly swung the other way and they think it's all wonderful. Neither estimation is honest' (Schafer, 1963, p. 124). He also acknowledged, 'There's no doubt that the best composers are writing in the avant-garde manner, which is sad' (Carpenter, 1992, p. 459). Many of the major British composers of the day attempted to confront this 'recent trend' by a superficial adoption of elements of serial music into their own music, such as the twelve-note theme in the 'Sanctus' of Britten's *Missa Brevis* (1959), but their main mode of response was disparagement. John Bridcut's recent book *Britten's Children* includes a reminiscence by one of Britten's young friends, Roger Duncan, who recalls going on walks with the composer and being told 'about Schönberg [*sic*] and twelve-tone music ''and how dreadful it was''' (Bridcut, 2006, p. 226).

In spite of Nono's suggestion that Goehr's music would flourish better outside England, Goehr, Maxwell Davies, Cardew and Birtwistle all chose to centre their entire careers in Britain. Thus their subsequent music can be read as a series of attempts at a mediation between the conservatism of the English tradition and the avant-garde ideas of Darmstadt. Davies, for example, combined serial techniques for the manipulation of pitch and duration with medieval plainsong and Ars Nova isorhythm, perhaps most notably in the orchestral work *Worldes Blis*, while Goehr's *Sutter's Gold*, a large work for chorus and orchestra, was described as 'mild if one compares this piece with . . . *Il Canto Sospeso* . . . and its expressive character is certainly much more straightforward and unambiguously appealing'.[2] Nevertheless, the premieres of both works were scandalous events: when *Worldes Blis* was performed at the 1969 Promenade Concerts many members of the audience walked out in protest, Davies temporarily withdrew the work and it was not revived for some years. The amateur chorus who sang in the first and only performance of *Sutter's Gold* at the 1963 Leeds Festival found the music unlike anything they had encountered before and hated the experience; Goehr himself said: 'The performance was an unmitigated disaster . . . and I resolved never to do anything like it again' (Northcott, 1980, p. 15).

Scandalous though these works may have been, the fact that Goehr and Davies were being offered commissions for major works is just as significant, for it demonstrates the level of support for these composers from the major institutions of

British musical life. A number of developments explain this support. In 1959 William Glock was appointed Controller of Music for the BBC, a position he held until 1973.[3] As his influence within the BBC grew, his advocacy of modern music became more and more evident and throughout the 1960s he was a champion of Davies, Goehr, Birtwistle and other progressive British composers, as well as providing opportunities for British audiences to hear the leading continental avant-garde composers, most notably Boulez, whom he was eventually able to appoint as Chief Conductor of the BBC Symphony Orchestra in 1971. Equally important was the foundation of new music ensembles such as the Pierrot Players (later the Fires Of London) by Davies and Birtwistle in 1967 and the London Sinfonietta in 1968, ensembles whose all-modern programming policies were clearly inspired by continental models such as the Domaines Musicales and the Internationales Kammerensemble Darmstadt. Elsewhere, the creation of new universities in Britain in the 1960s led to a growth in employment opportunities for modernist composers, most notably through the creation of a Music Department at York University where all the staff were composers, among them former students of Messiaen (Robert Sherlaw Johnson), Eisler (David Blake), Wellesz (Wilfrid Mellers) and Berio (Bernard Rands).

By the mid-1970s, when I was a student, modernism was thoroughly institutionalised: few universities did not boast a resident composer; the example set by the London Sinfonietta and the Fires of London had been followed by many more specialist new music ensembles; Boulez's concerts with the London Symphony Orchestra regularly featured revelatory accounts of Varèse, Webern, Messiaen and their avant-garde successors; the Arts Council toured new music to the regions; Radio 3 schedules were full of new work. In America, a similar institutionalisation could be observed, although there the absence of state-funded organisations, like the Arts Council and the BBC, focused new music more particularly in the academy. Tom Wolfe provides an acidic parody of a campus new music event in his *From Bauhaus to Our House*:

> on the campus the program begins with . . . one of Stockhausen's early compositions, *Punkte*, then Babbitt's *Ensembles for Synthesizer* . . . Jean Barraqué for a change of pace, then the committed plunge into a random-note or, as they say, 'stochastic' piece . . . by Iannis Xenakis. (Wolfe, 1981, p. 98)

The change in climate at the end of the 1970s can be attributed to a number of factors. The new political ideologies of Thatcherism and Reaganomics subjected state-funded cultural institutions like the Arts Council, the BBC, the National Endowment for the Arts, universities and orchestras to aggressive scrutiny—why should tax-payers fund organisations which were not delivering what the largest market demanded? In the wake of Glock's retirement from the BBC in 1973 its advocacy of modernism had already begun to wane and the new controller, Robert Ponsonby, found space for many of the more conservative composers who had accused Glock of neglecting, or even suppressing, their music. A new generation of

composers wanted to explore new materials, especially those in the rhythmic and harmonic domain opened up by minimalism. A combination of theoretical and critical approaches, variously described as 'feminist', 'post-structuralist' and 'post-modernist', gradually constituted themselves as 'the new musicology'. In America especially, but increasingly in Britain too, practitioners of the new musicology turned their attention to those musics which had been marginalised by the hegemony of 'Western art music' and therefore turned their backs on the modernist mainstream which Darmstadt had come to represent. *Von Kranichstein zur Gegenwart* is full of photographs of white male composers, hardly the ideal territory for a new musicologist, although as I hope to suggest later, there is considerable scope for the fresh insights of the new musicology in the music of the Darmstadt School.

Whereas public antagonism to modern music had been regarded as philistinism in the years since the 1950s, it became respectable—even chic—to attack the achievements of the post-war avant-garde. Shortly before I first presented this paper in Mainz, the British cellist Julian Lloyd Webber made an outspoken and widely reported attack on 'the tyranny of atonality'[4] in post-war contemporary music, arguing that this has driven people out of the concert halls and led to fewer children being interested in classical music. The late 1990s also saw the launch of the Master Prize, a new award for 'works for symphony orchestra . . . with the power to communicate with and engage a broad range of music-lovers'. Here too was evidence of the same tendency, equating a traditional form—the orchestra—with music's capacity to communicate with audiences and implying that without an initiative like the Master Prize there would be a lack of such works in the future.

Lloyd Webber and Master Prize launched their critiques of modern music within the domain of the music business; within academic music a similar project was attempted in the issue of *Contemporary Music Review* devoted to the 'New Tonality'. This issue tried to draw quite distinct and progressive traditions of thought, such as Lou Harrison's work on intonation and Louis Andriessen's development of a historically conscious, post-tonal modality, into something altogether more reactionary, the so-called New Tonality. According to its editors, 'if anything groups the composers of The New Tonality, it is their common rejection of the ''march of progress'' imposed by internationally accepted norms of pitch manipulation . . . the Darmstadt composers, American serialists, aleatory music' (Jaffe, 1992, p. 34). In his 1994 paper 'A ''New Totality''?' which was presented at the 1994 Ferienkurse and subsequently published in *Perspectives of New Music*, James Boros argued that this is part of a 'large-scale revisionist project . . . [fabricating] a lop-sided history in which Western tonal music was somehow driven underground during the post-World War II years only to boldly re-emerge from its ''exile'' in the present day' (Boros, 1995, p. 540).

I have suggested that the editors of 'The New Tonality' may have grounds for believing that in the post-war era modernist, non-tonal music did achieve a position of institutionally supported dominance. However, 'The New Tonality' attempts to

reinforce its conspiracy theories with more specific musical analysis, in particular a discussion of *Le marteau sans maître*. Lehrdahl argues that because Boulez used serial techniques to organise the musical materials of *Le marteau* and yet listeners cannot hear the serial operations, there is a 'gap between compositional system and cognised result' (Lehrdahl, 1992, p. 101). He goes on to state that this 'is a fundamental problem of contemporary music . . . Composers are faced with the unpleasant alternative of working with private codes or with no compositional grammar at all'. For Lehrdahl, it is only by returning to the public code of tonality that composers can find more attractive alternatives. Again there is a sort of partial logic at work here. Darmstadt composers devoted many hours of lectures and pages of print to explaining the serial basis of their work and in so doing effectively defined the nature of subsequent critical discussion: not to discuss the works of the Darmstadt School within the parameters established by their composers was to invite the accusation that one had not properly understood the works. But, in spite of these lengthy serial analyses, there are only a handful of Darmstadt works in which the serial basis of the music can be detected by the ear; if the serial construction is so important, argues a critic like Lehrdahl, and yet it is not an explicit part of the listeners' experience, the listeners' experience must be impoverished.

Some of the Darmstadt composers were aware of this problem. Nono, in particular, ends 'The Development of Serial Technique' with the regret that: 'wir haben uns bewusst aufs Kompositionnstechnische beschrankt und das Asthetische ausser Betracht gelassen' ('We have confined ourselves to discussing the techniques of composition at the expense of considering aesthetic issues') (Nono, 1958, p. 37). As we know, the Darmstadt School itself was never able to conduct that aesthetic debate, and it is only in the subsequent writings of Metzger, Lachenmann and others (few of whose writings, unfortunately, are available to non-German readers) that discussion has moved from technique to aesthetics. I want to conclude by proposing some avenues of aesthetic debate which might usefully be explored as we disentangle the music of Darmstadt from the ideological barbed wire which its creators and subsequent institutional histories have thrown up around it. Undoubtedly there are some works of daunting abstraction—the first book of *Structures*, *Kontrapunkte* and the early *Klavierstücke*, for example—which match the tabula rasa image of Darmstadt modernism, but I would argue that the majority of works from the Darmstadt School are characterised by a remarkable openness to musical ideas from across cultures and across history. These works are inclusive rather than exclusive. For example, a striking feature of a number of Darmstadt works by Stockhausen is their transformation of aspects of American popular music, particularly jazz. *Gruppen* is, of course, a spectacular exploration of the new technique of spatial composition, but Stockhausen's prominent use of percussion, electric guitar, piano and choirs of brass also connects it to a familiar musical tradition, big band jazz. In the latter stages of *Gruppen* that tradition is explicitly evoked as brass riffs ride over a massive drum-break which could surely not have been written unless its composer knew what a swing band sounded like.

American popular music has a peculiar position in the history of the post-war avant-garde. Before 1939 the appropriation of stylistic elements from jazz and other American popular musics signified the left-wing political affiliations of composers such as Weill and Britten. On the other hand, Kurt Weill's fascination with things American had aroused the distaste of Webern, who could find nothing 'of our great Middle-European tradition in such a composer',[5] and Adorno's objections to all forms of popular music are well documented. What distinguishes Stockhausen's jazz references from those of the pre-war period is that his approach to his chosen gestural and formal models is not imitative but transcendent, a point Stockhausen himself made when comparing the work of tape collage-ists with his own *Telemusik*. As its title suggests, *Refrain*, from 1959, is another serial jazz-influenced work, which borrows the idea of a 'chorus' from jazz. In *Refrain* the influence is small group jazz, specifically the Modern Jazz Quartet whom Stockhausen had heard in New York in 1958. It is significant, however, that where the Modern Jazz Quartet backed vibraphone and piano with the normal jazz support of bass and drums, Stockhausen has another keyboard, the celesta, instead.

Popular music references within the Darmstadt School were not exclusively North American; the drum-break with which Nono ends his *Polifonica-Monodia-Ritmica*, premiered in Darmstadt in 1951, is a deconstruction of the Brazilian 'Jemanja' rhythm from which the whole work's rhythmic construction is derived. Similarly, as Massimo Mila suggested as early as 1960, Nono's *Il Canto Sospeso* can be heard as a 'freedom Mass' (in Mila, 1975, p. 384); its formal divisions also echo both the mass and Baroque cantata and Passion settings. Movement VIa of *Il Canto Sospeso* can be heard both as an exposition of the wedge shape of the pitch series, in the voices, and as a modern 'Tuba mirum'.

The advocates of the 'New Tonality' condemned serialism as a failure because serial processes cannot be heard. In fact, when Darmstadt composers wanted the series to be heard, when it is a crucial part of the imagery of the music, it can be heard, as it is in both the fourth and the sixth movements of *Il Canto Sospeso*. But generally the aesthetic purpose of Darmstadt serialism is not that the series should occupy the musical foreground; rather, it is that the serial principle is the method whereby musical transformations can be achieved. This is particularly clear in works like *Polifonica-Monodia-Ritmica, Gruppen, Il Canto Sospeso* and *Refrain* because they transform known musical quantities—types of gesture, ways of playing together, timbral possibilities. Darmstadt serialism is non-hierarchical and polymorphous, so when serial principles are brought to bear on non-serial materials the hierarchical structures within those materials are inevitably deconstructed. In *Refrain* the glittering timbres of the Modern Jazz Quartet float off their bass lines, in *Gruppen* big band gestures are released from verse-chorus forms, in *Polifonica-Monodia-Ritmica* hot Brazilian drumming is freed from the bar-line, in *Il Canto Sospeso* social and political relationships replace theological relationships.

Fifty years after the creation of this music there is still a reluctance, especially in writing in English, to shift the focus of debate from technique to meaning, from an

account of how the series was used to a discussion of the result of its use. What is the significance of the transformations which occur in these works of the Darmstadt School? Why do Stockhausen's serial transformations of jazz in *Gruppen* and *Refrain* liberate us from nostalgia in a way that Bernd Alois Zimmermann's neo-classical (and/or post-modern?) incorporation of jazz in *Nobody Knows the Trouble I See* does not? What do these works tell us about progressive sensibilities in Europe in the years after 1945 and how does this relate to the process of national political redefinition taking place at the same time? To what extent does the subjective musical reality of listening to these works challenge received, institutionalised opinion about the nature of the Darmstadt School's aesthetic project? And how can one reconcile the diversity of the musical manifestations of Darmstadt with the subsequent accounts of Darmstadt as a monolithic musical tyranny? My own re-evaluation of these works began in 1994 during preparations for *Music after Zero Hour*, a series of radio documentaries for the BBC, the scripts for which are presented in a revised version elsewhere in this volume. As a composer who is interested in making music which is contingent upon, not hermetically removed from, as broad a range of musical experiences as possible, I recognise the danger that I may be finding in Darmstadt those things which I am predisposed to find. Nevertheless, and in the face of the anti-modernism which I have described and which, ten years after these words were first made public, continues to be depressingly fashionable, my exploration of these 'fruitful lands' goes on.

Notes

[1] *Von Kranichstein zur Gegenwart* was published as part of the 50th anniversary celebrations of the Darmstadt Ferienkurse.
[2] Hugh Wood, in Northcott (1980, p. 24).
[3] Earlier versions of this article misdated Glock's reign at the BBC. I am indebted to Professor Philip Rupprecht for pointing this out to me.
[4] Julian Lloyd Webber, address to the Davos World Business Forum, January 1998; the text can be found at http://www.churchill-society-london.org.uk/JLWDavos.html
[5] Dallapiccola reporting a meeting with Webern, in Moldenhauer (1978, p. 537).

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