***Transformations of Musical Modernism*, edited by Erling E. Guldbrandsen and Julian Johnson. Cambridge University Press, 2015. £74.99**

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This edited volume – one of the latest in the prolific *Music Since 1900* series overseen by Arnold Whittall – marks the next stage in the rehabilitation of modernism within the aesthetics of Western art music, following other recent work (most notably David Metzer’s *Musical Modernism in the 21st Century*, Cambridge, 2009) that has sought to demonstrate the continuing relevance of modernist ideas. Its starting point is the term modernism itself: as the editors note, it has often been understood as a description of a particularly abrasive musical style, or else as a specific historical epoch characterised by a naively Adornian, idealistic and deliberately elitist approach towards questions of aesthetic and compositional technique. By contrast, the writers here describe it as an *attitude* of historical self-awareness that can be just as present in performance or listening as in composition. As such, it continues with undiminished force today, having even seen something of a resurgence in the past twenty years or so (as the influence of postmodernist ideas has waned).

This resurgence carries with it a need to rethink established viewpoints on the history of the modernist project and on the relationship of modernism with tradition. The editors argue that new music is not only *inevitably* shaped by preceding traditions but actually affects subsequent generations’ understanding of these traditions and thus changes them (p. 4). The result is a tripartite division in the structure of the book: it begins by ‘rethinking’ modernism, exploring the big ideas that stand behind transformed conceptions of the term, moves to ‘rewriting modernism’, revisiting compositional and analytical processes in the light of these transformations and ends by ‘replaying modernism’, exploring the vital role played by performers in articulating modernist concerns. The result is a wide-ranging yet remarkably cohesive study; similar ideas recur within and refract across each of the three main sections, and there is a real sense of an emerging consensus among scholars about many of the central issues of this repertoire.

The extent of the book’s revisionist intentions is made clear by the inclusion of an opening chapter by Susan McClary, whose provocative 1989 article ‘Terminal Prestige’ reignited the debate around the status of modernist music within postmodern culture. Here, her contribution is less polemical – a reappraisal of post-war modernism as a historical phenomenon, informed by the philosophical category of the sublime – and rather less effective. In particular, she closes with three glancing summaries of recent operas (by Kaija Saariaho, George Benjamin and Salvatore Sciarrino) which are little more than glowing record-review tributes to each composer’s ‘brilliant orchestration’, ‘immediately comprehensible’ soundworld, or ‘ability to produce moods’. (Surely the question is not whether or not modernist music can produce moods – its extreme moodiness has if anything been its curse – but what kinds of moods these might be, and what responses they might provoke?)

Nonetheless, the inclusion of her work is a welcome indicator of the editors’ intention: this is a manifesto for musical modernism that has learned from the critiques of the late twentieth century, and is as alert to the interests and concerns of the former ‘new musicology’ as to those of mid-century modernist aesthetics. In the process, past polemics are softened; alongside McClary’s contribution, it is noteworthy that Boulez, once considered the mouthpiece *par excellence* of scientistic high modernism (and perhaps the primary antagonist to McClary’s views), is the subject here of two chapters (by Edward Campbell and Erling Guldbrandsen) which set out numerous ways in which the totality of his aesthetic writings and compositional processes challenges this rather one-dimensional stereotype.

The focus on the rehabilitation of expression continues in chapters by Arnold Whittall and Michael Cherlin: Whittall through a whistle-stop tour of five British composers active after 2000 (Richard Emsley, Rebecca Saunders, Simon Holt, James MacMillan, and Jonathan Harvey) whose output variously engages with the legacy of musical expressionism; Cherlin through a close reading of James Dillon’s *Come live with me* that explores its relationship to the connections between the erotic and the spiritual in Jewish Kabbalistic thought. Whittall’s chapter reads rather like a postscript to his *Musical Composition in the Twentieth Century*, moving with virtuosic speed through the central aesthetic and technical concerns of each composer, with numerous compositions referenced as exemplars, some analysed in more detail and some simply name-checked. The real value of this approach is that it allows clear connections and distinctions to emerge between each of the composers under discussion – the tension between violence and sensuality in Holt and MacMillan, the ‘raptly austere’ (p. 73) qualities of Emsley’s *for piano* series which go even beyond the serenity of Harvey’s late Buddhist works. By contrast, Cherlin’s focus on a single work by a single composer enables him to engage with the score in considerable detail, on its connections with Kabbalism as well as its context within Dillon’s output more broadly, and to make the case for a broader consideration of erotics within twentieth-century music. One particular strength of the volume is the balance it maintains between chapters like Whittall’s, which offer far-reaching overviews of particular terrain, and others like Cherlin’s that focus in greater detail on a particular work, composer or issue.

Modernism, as portrayed here, engages not just with the intellect, but with the body, with specific places and times, with the emotions, even with the spirit. Julian Johnson’s contribution traces this (often neglected) dimension of modernist aesthetics from Bartók’s Sonata for Solo Violin through to viola works by Berio and Ligeti. He argues persuasively that the folk-like qualities of these works, and their explorations of the physical features of the instrument, point to an interest in ‘sonic particularity’, in music-making as something expressively laden and alert to cultural, historical and physical realities and constituting a vital counterpart to the more abstract concerns often associated with modernist discourse.

This awareness of modernism’s reliance on specific places and situations, a deliberate antidote to the universalism with which it is more usually associated, is most obvious in chapters by Björn Heile and David Metzer which focus on its engagement with (and reliance on) other geographical and cultural phenomena. Heile traces the long career of Erik Bergman as an exemplar of the developing ‘cosmopolitanism’ of modernism, its growing ability to look beyond itself to other cultures, and thus to see even its own practices in a new light. Metzer identifies a similar reflexivity in the burgeoning relationship between so-called ‘new music’ and indie rock, and the reliance of both upon an increasingly shared infrastructure of festivals, magazines and performers. His analysis of the consequences for considerations of genre within a pluralist environment – of the varying disdain and eagerness with which musicians have treated labels such as ‘indie-classical’ or ‘post-genre’ – is particularly thought-provoking.

Another aspect of the ‘sonic particularity’ Johnson identifies is the concept of a music that is aware of its own history. This is the focus of a number of chapters, in tandem with a variety of perspectives on the aesthetics of the fragment, a recurrent concern of modernist music. Helpful overviews are provided by Jean-Paul Olive’s outline of montage aesthetics in post-war Europe and Peter Edwards’s survey of Ligeti’s relationship to tradition; most effective, though, were chapters by Samuel Wilson and Marion Hestholm which dealt in complementary ways with the connections between modernist and romantic aesthetics of quotation and fragmentation. Hestholm emphasises the *experience* of fragmentation (its ‘appearance’, in Nietzschian terms) over questions of interpretation or historical meaning. By contrast, Wilson (via a virtuosic and deeply contextualised interpretation of Silvestrov’s Fifth Symphony) unpacks the varied ways in which fragmentary references to the past can function as *ruins*, in the light of which we gain new insights about contemporary ways of being.

The final dimension of modernism as a transformed practice is found in an increasing awareness of the role played (literally) by performers. The omnipresence of Adorno’s writings throughout the volume is turned on its head in a remarkable chapter by Arnulf Mattes outlining the influence of the violinist Rudolf Kolisch – whose performances of Beethoven and Schoenberg embody an aesthetic of uncomfortable rigour and ‘otherness’ – on Adorno’s developing theory of ‘true’ musical interpretation as an act of critical resistance. These interpretative questions are continued within chapters by Anders Førisdal and Tanja Orning that explore the performative implications of ‘radically idiomatic’ works, as Richard Barrett describes them (p. 280); in these compositions, most notably those of Brian Ferneyhough and Klaus K. Hübler, the limits of virtuosity are explored through a deconstruction of the constituent processes by which players produce sound on a given instrument. Orning, in particular, draws out the ethical dimension of this practice – the way it forces performers to abandon ingrained conceptions of *Werktreue*, or ingrained bodily reflexes, and become newly aware both of their own creative role in performance and of the specific physical actions they are undertaking. As a result, ‘radically idiomatic’ compositions can revitalise a performer’s understanding of their own practice; Francesca Placanica’s study of the interaction between John Cage and Cathy Berberian in the composition of *Aria* highlights not only Berberian’s transformative influence on Cage’s vocal writing (and that of many subsequent composers), but also the effect of *Aria* as ‘an epiphanic *medium* through which Berberian realized her own release from [the] cultural and social constraints’ of post-war Milan (p. 274).

The book is not without its lacunae. The close focus on musical concerns occasionally obscures the possibility of connections to other spheres such as literature or visual arts, each of which understands the term modernism in quite different ways. Even within the musical arena, the chosen repertoire remains fairly homogenous. In the introduction, the editors acknowledge that ‘there is little discussion of the American avant-garde, minimalism, spectralism, or neo-romanticism’, nor of non-Western or electroacoustic works (p. 7); I would have valued the chance to see how the ideas presented here might apply to these other repertoires – especially since a ‘transformed’ idea of modernism as an attitude, rather than an epoch or a style, broadens its relevance so spectacularly. More pointedly, given the cutting-edge aims of the book, only two chapters (Whitall’s and Metzer’s) engage substantively with any music written after 2000: if modernism is really to be considered as an absolutely contemporary, living phenomenon, why not include discussions of recent works by, for example, Hans Abrahamsen, Wolfgang Rihm, or Liza Lim, alongside the ‘modernist canon’ of Boulez, Ligeti, Berio, Nono, Ferneyhough?

But these seem like minor quibbles when set against the variety and detail of this collection. It is both a document of the transformations it describes and a rich contribution to that process of renewal.