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Chapter 9

Presentness and the past in contemporary British opera

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Introduction: modernism and the distant past

Medievalism is a prominent feature of British music, among both pre- and post-war so-called modernist composers. Speaking about the music of Harrison Birtwistle—but in such a way that it could easily be applied to his contemporaries—Michael Hall has summarised a style which is the result of a ‘combination of medieval[…] and twentieth-century interests’ (1984, p. 9); indeed, Birtwistle’s engagement with these techniques is already well documented.¹ This historicist fixation of a peculiarly ‘medieval’, or at least ‘early’, sort is a preoccupation Birtwistle is known to have shared with Peter Maxwell Davies and Alexander Goehr, composers with whom he studied in Manchester in the 1950s. Collectively, these composers formed part of a small group who set the agenda for an increasingly radical post-war British new music to come. That they did so during a time of a folk and early music revival has, however, been mostly overlooked in scholarship on the subject to date.

Against the backdrop of a historical context usually downplayed when discussing modernist music, this chapter will examine two examples of the creative use of the musical past in British operas: Taverner (1970) by Peter Maxwell Davies and Arianna (1995) by Alexander Goehr. These two works bookend a post-war moment in British music, the first representing a relatively early example of the Manchester School’s cultural import and influence (and, even, ability to shock), while the second, written 25 years later and in the final years of the twentieth century, appears as something wholly institutional and institutionalised. Despite their composers’ proximity, the works present contrasting stylistic approaches in (but not limited to) their treatment of the past. The historical trajectory connecting them reflects in interesting ways the interconnected destinies of early music performance practitioners.
providing valuable insight into a historically British medievalist trend (or trends), and illuminating—through the medium of early music—the role that modernist music has played in British post-war cultural life. More broadly, I hope here to engage with the somewhat poetical notion that the very old can be, and so often has been, used to say something new, especially in musical modernism; the chronologically disruptive usage of anachronism is a particular feature worthy of attention here. Ultimately, I hope not only to enrich our understanding of the operas in question but to illuminate some of the ways in which artists do, and have, engaged with the past across disciplinary and generic boundaries.

* * *

The idea that the new might be in some way found, or invoked, through a synergy of the present with a (distant) past is not without precedent in the context of artistic modernism: which is to say, the artistic response to modernity characterised by, among many other things, formal innovation and progress-orientated ideals. A sort of call to arms for the early twentieth-century modernist aesthete, Ezra Pound’s famous 1928 injunction to ‘Make it New’ is—somewhat contradictorily—the product of a sustaining fascination with the Occitan troubadour tradition, Dante, and others. If modernism signals, as it is also often said to, a historical break with what went before, what is the ‘it’ in Pound’s proclamation exactly if not an object of a non-contiguous past; and, moreover, through what process might it (and indeed why should it) be made new? To consider only the beginnings of early twentieth-century musical modernism, prominent examples of composers finding inspiration in early music spring to mind: Webern’s own innovations could reasonably be said, for example, to have been partially inspired by his doctoral studies on the music of Renaissance composer Heinrich Isaac. Stravinsky, too, drew tirelessly from the past and in all kinds of ways: be that in his neoclassical works, in the primitivistic medievalism of Rite of Spring and Les Noces, or in his (re)discovery of Gesualdo and the stylistic shift this signalled for his career. This is a theme that, we will see, is pursued later in the century.
What, then, might we say of the appeal that early music seems to have had for the modernist artist or composer? Common wisdom dictates that modernism observed, from the beginning, that the well-trodden harmonic teleology of the tonal tradition (and the institutions that supported it) needed rejecting in some way. Early music, similarly marginal, must have had a sort of subversive potential, then; all the while, it still promised some historical continuity.  

Perhaps the types of compositional processes, far removed from the peculiarly western (teleo)logic of functional harmony, and owing more to extra-musical organising principles like shape and proportion, had a natural resonance with the interests of the modern composer. Mark Delaere has made this particular case in a chapter analysing Harrison Birtwistle’s *Hoquetus Petrus*, highlighting what he has called the exemplary or legitimating function of music from the late medieval period (2009, p. 192). The musical innovations of the fourteenth-century Ars Nova, he says, were as radical as those of the twentieth century; it is often argued that composers from both periods shared a similar ambition to write a truly new kind of music.

**British medievalism in perspective**

Musical modernism’s interest in, and debt to, the techniques of a distant musical past intensified, I would argue, later in the century and in the post-war period. Whilst modernism, it might be said, reached a natural apex by the outbreak of World War II, it casts a long and lingering shadow. Where literary theory uses the term ‘late modernism’ typically to describe a generation of authors active immediately before and after the war, in music the term has retained some capital for identifying types of a highly formalised or institutionalised avant-garde where, in a rapidly diversified and increasingly popular musical scene, emergent descriptions like the ‘postmodern’ have not seemed appropriate.  

Whilst a form of modernist medievalism can be found in the works of conservative figures such as Carl Orff, it might also be observed in the radically progressive Darmstadt
composers (Boulez, Stockhausen et al.). Those composers were driven—again, somewhat contradictorily—by a politically motivated and forward-looking desire to wipe the slate clean following the traumas of the Second World War. Indeed, that they took their cue from Webern—perhaps the most medievally inclined of the Viennese School—instead of, say, Schoenberg, is only the beginning of it, and, as David Metzer argues, after self-consciously ‘reinventing’ music in the 1950s, Darmstadt seemed to quickly exhaust the techniques of total serialism and fall back into borrowing and collage during the 1960s (2003, p. 111). The resultant musical style (or styles) connected with a later wave of Darmstadt-associated composers like Luciano Berio, Mauricio Kagel, and Bernd Alois Zimmermann embodies what Metzer calls a ‘confluence of different periods,’ by which the historical linearity of time as typically manifest in musical discourse is instead imagined as a ‘space in which past, present, and future were all equidistant from the centre’ (Metzer, 2003, pp. 108–109).

Zimmerman himself referred to this as ‘the sphericality of time’; a music animated by temporally disruptive logics of anachronism.

Chronological non-linearities of this sort exemplify broader cultural anxieties regarding the past, and reiterate, to a point, the modernist moment at the start of twentieth century which anticipated (and then responded to) the violence of the First World War. Notwithstanding an aesthetics which responds to historical trauma, this discussion so far has concerned a very particular internationally minded, but essentially continental, modernism (and its historicist correlate). This recurrent impulse among composers to compose with the past has many and varied sources, which are historically and culturally rooted.

Often overlooked when discussing twentieth century musical modernism, the extent to which British composers were involved in Darmstadt during its heyday is underappreciated, and, as Philip Rupprecht has recently noted, far from trivial (2015, p. 72). While, no doubt, a context of modernist musical internationalism in the Darmstadt vein retains relevance for the discussion to come—especially since the Manchester School are much credited with
belatedly bringing its innovations to the British Isles—the particular ways that post-war British modernist composers came to incorporate the distant past in their music (as well as the contexts in which they did so) is noteworthy. This is especially the case from the late 1960s, a period when Darmstadt’s influence on the contemporary music world began to wane. It is timely, then, for a discussion of how British composers have reused our shared musical past in that same period, and to what extent they did so in a distinctly ‘British’ way.

Pertinent examples of prominent British modernist composers drawing on medievalist (or Renaissance) themes are numerous and varied. Elizabeth Lutyens for example—an early English advocate of Webernian serialism—has been described by Laurel Parsons as looking ‘both forward into the continental future, and backward into the English past’ in her music (2010, p. 270): her *Tears of Night* from 1972 was composed for countertenor and David Munrow’s Early Music Consort, for instance. Gordon Crosse, a composer contemporary with the Manchester School, initially undertook research on fifteenth-century music before focussing on composition. His early scores featured, for example, dramatic collisions between early and new music styles (such as *Some Marches on a Ground* from 1970). Other highly prominent and more recent British composers have been similarly inspired, albeit in their own personal styles. Judith Weir draws on a more immediate modal musical language which evokes early and folk idioms; an early breakthrough work, *King Harald’s Saga* (1979), established for her a career-long interest in medieval themes. More recently, George Benjamin’s opera, *Written on Skin* (2012), (which had extraordinary coverage for a new opera, including broadcast on TV’s BBC 4 and a ROH revival in 2017) dramatises a textual engagement with a thirteenth-century troubadour text.

How, then, might we begin to explain this enduring, and uniquely British, theme? Paul Griffiths (2010, p. 152) has briefly made this observation and summarises a number of the most obvious of explanations: the fact that English musicians and musicologists were taking a ‘leading part in the rediscovery of early music’; that an older generation of English
composers, such as Britten and Tippett, had been interested in Tudor music and Purcell; and that English musical culture is popularly assumed to have been last ‘actively progressive’ in the age of Dunstable.

With this said, I would like now to draw attention to a more inclusive historical context so as to situate better types of avant-garde musical kept notionally separate from our broader cultural historical trends. Indeed, it should be evident that medievalism in modern British culture goes at least as far back as the Gothic Revival and the proto-modernism of the Pre-Raphaelite School. It does then not simply reappear as a defining feature of the 1960s and 1970s British counterculture so much as adapt and evolve with the times: a development I will consider in a moment. For Richard Utz (2016), whose work has done much to detail the history of ‘medievalism’, this phenomenon is the product of the supposed ‘unique continuity’ by which British history has been understood; a continuity that has been continuously reflected in English language readings of ‘the Middle Ages’. For the imagined community of Britain, he says, the monarchy ‘survived’, allowing for new reimaginations of Britishness through the continuity of Medieval traditions (p. 122). Of poetry in particular, Chris Jones (2016) comes to a similar conclusion via a different route, where, in the British context, medievalism symbolises a kind of ‘native’ tradition: ‘medievalism is, by another name, the process by which all forms of cultural expression in the British Isles build for themselves myths of origin’ (p. 14). Indeed, among the proliferation of ‘-isms’ populating our intellectual landscape, ‘medievalism’ first appears in English-language nineteenth-century sources.

**The contexts of Peter Maxwell Davies’ *Taverner***

Emerging in the decades following the 1950s, early music—and the historically informed performance movement more generally—was the product of an age of protest. Nick Wilson’s recent study of the business of early music reinforces this, noting the implicit rejection of nineteenth-century canon-orientated ideals and practices: ‘In line with other new social
movements[...] of the time, such as the feminist and gay rights movements, Early Music provided a voice for the identity-less[...] and sought to counter the alienation of the market’ (2013, p. 7). It is striking—but entirely relevant—to place this alongside the roughly contemporaneous popular folk and medieval revival which was part of the then counterculture. Folk and progressive rock music(s) not by coincidence, gave ‘period’ instruments new audiences and reinterpreted ancient folk tunes, embracing aspects of British folk tradition and community in a fast modernising, technological, and increasingly globalised post-war era. Rob Young artfully conveys just this popular zeitgeist in Electric Eden: Unearthing Britain’s Visionary Music, identifying the movement in the friction of the era’s most acute dialectics: conservation and progression, city and country, acoustics and electricity, familiar and uncanny (2010, p. 9). Young’s panoramic survey of visionary British music is a varied one and emphasises the cultural import of early music performance by celebrating the efforts of early music populariser David Munrow for helping to ‘liberate folk music from its conventions in the 1960s’ (p. 202). Young’s account, for all its detail, ends its discussion of composers (of a self-identifying art-music tradition) at Benjamin Britten—the post-war generation of avant-garde composers do not feature.

The relationship between popular music and the early music performance movement—in a period, moreover, of youthful renewal and rebellion—is interesting and little understood. I want, though, to take a moment to consider how popular culture could have slipped into the supposedly highbrow world of new and avant-garde opera via the medievalist preoccupations of its then leading exponents (or, indeed, vice versa). Contemporary music, after all, could never exist in an intellectual vacuum, however we might occasionally be inclined to treat it.

A salient point in Philip Rupprecht’s recent British Musical Modernism (2015) is that the radical new music that began to emerge in England in the 1950s, spearheaded by the Manchester School (of Birtwistle, Davies, Goehr, etc.), was also highly subversive, its
beatnik streak prefiguring counterculture trends that followed. Indeed, the radicalism was a belated one, and was viewed with some disdain by a conservative musical establishment whose most progressive exponents—such as Lord Berners or Constant Lambert—were considerably more effete and aristocratic than their continental modernist neighbours (2015, p. 48). That this new music came from northern grammar school students studying in the provincial Royal Manchester College of Music is all the more noteworthy.¹¹

Scholarly work keen to respect, or even reinforce, the categorical separations of pop and folk music from classical and early music, has often underestimated the potential for a shared experiential and historical zone for mutual transmission.¹² In an article detailing the mutual development of the early music performance movement with that of contemporaneous popular musical trends (and the potential for shared experiences therein), Elizabeth Upton (2012) has repeated the idea—very familiar to scholars of pop culture—that changes in technology in the mid-century meant that a wide audience born after World War II could grow up receiving music through recordings and broadcasts. The effect was to link, like no time before it, generational groups through shared listening across class and education lines. Consider, for a moment, the pop medievalism of bands like Jethro Tull alongside their—in a way equally fantastical—contemporaries, David Munrow and his Early Music Consort. There is a fine, even non-existent, line between scholastic, ‘informed’, medievalism and medievalism as entertainment. On this spectrum, it is possible to place the work of supposedly ‘serious’ composers.

Peter Maxwell Davies was, no doubt, a product of this time too and by the late 1960s had a reputation as the ‘enfant terrible’ of British new music. His compositional career, which had seen him, at first, embrace a po-faced and structuralist Darmstadt internationalism, later moved to embrace a subversive and theatrical aesthetic: one very much tied to the time with all its political and social upheaval.¹³ It is crucial to understand this turn was rooted, as Rupprecht also notes, in resurgent local and British traditions (2015, p. 57). This moment is
not so much a move towards nationalistic regression as a simultaneously progressive and nostalgic embrace of both past and present simultaneously, rooted in post-war, and post-empire, welfare state, and countercultural contexts.\textsuperscript{14}

Davies’ music of the late 1960s and 1970s is often characterised by a relentless exploration of extremes, by wild juxtaposition and overt parody, and an ongoing fixation with the sublimation into his own modern language of techniques from a distant musical past: an early interest which nonetheless flourished in parallel to the developments in concurrent early music performance. His first opera, an imagined account of the life of sixteenth-century English composer John Taverner, is in many respects the culmination of much of his work at this time. Composed through 1962–68 and partly reconstructed in 1970 after a fire at Davies’ home, \textit{Taverner} was likewise, according to David Beard, the source for many of Peter Maxwell Davies’ most ‘varied musical concerns of the period[…] plainchant, medieval and Renaissance music, parody techniques and expressionist devices’ (2009, p. 79).

The harmonic language is, we could say, of a consistently strident and modern variety throughout: sets of pitches (derived from such sources as the \textit{Gloria tibi trinitas} chant) are progressively transformed through quasi-serial techniques.\textsuperscript{15} This musical transformation mirrors the gradual transformation of the character John Taverner from Catholic to Protestant, composer to prosecutor, on behalf of the unnamed king (Henry VIII). Beginning with Taverner on trial for heresy by the White Abbot, the opera ends with him escorting the same White Abbot to his execution. The austere final moments of the work—with Taverner fallen ‘prostrate before the pyre’—transition into a thoroughly unironic rendition of his \textit{In nomine} (from the Benedictus in his \textit{Gloria tibi trinitas} mass) played by an offstage ensemble of recorders which emerge from a receding and dissonant orchestral texture. It is perhaps the most overt example of the abrupt juxtaposition of ‘old’ and ‘new’ in the work, but also an uncharacteristically understated moment in an opera of otherwise continuous expressionistic intensity. The \textit{In nomine} represents, for John Taverner, his most enduring legacy: an
inauspicious, though beautiful, moment in a Benedictus that would later be transformed into a musical form synonymous with sixteenth-century consort music (and later still taken up by composers in the twentieth century). In the opera’s closing moments, this musico-dramatic instance transitions forwards to Taverner’s future by turning its own present musical clock backwards in time: musical time itself converges on a kind of a conceptual present.

Demonstrably, the evocation of a musical past in Taverner is achieved through primarily timbral and textural means, and, much like Davies’ parodistic usage of foxtrots—as in, say, his St Thomas Wake and other works of the period—has all the hallmarks of pastiche. A number of other moments in the opera stand out for their usage of old musical forms and period instruments. For example, Act 2 Scene ii depicts a throne room discussion between characters identified as the King and the Cardinal (presumably King Henry VIII and Cardinal Wolsey) and a Jester. Crucially, this scene is one of a couple to feature an audibly extravagant onstage ensemble of shawms, recorders, sackbuts (and more) playing a sequence of recognisably ‘period’ pavans, galliards, and marches in between passages of meter-less dialogue. Additionally, much of the dialogue is accompanied by a regal organ (offstage) and a positive organ (onstage), whose material—typified also by long meandering white note lines—evokes and quotes an undercurrent of chant and sacred music. The passage in Figure 9.1 is typical and it demonstrates a theatrical and chaotic combination of ornamentation, parodistic ficta, and a folky rhythmic regularity undermined by an unsettling polyrhythmic vertical structure.

<COMP: Place Figure 9.1 Here> Pavan from Taverner Act 2 Scene 2

Period music is, here, comically distorted but playful. Heard today, it sounds like a parody of the excesses of then current trends in authentic early music performance, characterised, in the words of Daniel Leech-Wilkinson in The Invention of Medieval Music, by ‘instruments, lots of them’ (2002, p. 13). The effect is strikingly cinematic however, rendering and even celebrating, in theatrical terms, Richard Taruskin’s critique of
‘authentistic’ early music aesthetics. This is to say that the quest for a spurious early music authenticity is, in its essence, a modernist endeavour. Authentistic performance, Taruskin says, ‘grew up alongside modernism, shares its tenets, and will probably decline alongside it as well’ (1995, p. 102).

In an analysis from the time of Taverner’s premier performance, Stephen Arnold (1972) has noted that the quoted material from which this section is drawn (though quite disguised) ranges geographically from England to Italy and from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century. Anachronisms of this sort are enigmatic, and the resultant surreal panorama of the early musical Renaissance mimics (or allegorises) the drama and dialogue itself, which depicts through intermittent dialogue the break with the Catholic Church, the founding of the Church of England, and the unveiling of plans to annex the monasteries. This opera by one of Britain’s foremost high-modernists, therefore, uses a strikingly cinematic scoring language, revelling in the types of ‘serendipitous’ and ‘creative’ anachronisms used, invariably, in medieval film as communicative shorthand to bridge the past and the present (Pugh & Weisl, 2013, p. 84) in entertaining ways.

* * *

It would be remiss not to note that opera has always dealt with medieval themes (Wagner and Rossini spring most obviously to mind), but there is something to be said for opera post-cinema and post-radio: opera, moreover, written after the tumult of the mid-century and made possible in a post-war consensus of social democracy in which an individual such as Peter Maxwell Davies might have, for the first time, flourished.17 Taverner, the opera, is the product of an age of youthful rebellion, collage, and pastiche from a time where new types of social mobility (coupled with rapid technological advancement) facilitated new shared spaces for cultural transmission. The result of this was the febrile pop-cultural landscape of the 1960s and 1970s, from which the avant-garde can now surely not be excluded, even if its exact relationships might be tricky to discern. However, Davies’
medieval interests are undeniably mirrored by contemporaneous trends in historical performance and congruent with a then highly experimental popular culture.

The recurrence of David Munrow in this chapter serves as some evidence of this, and it was, in fact, David Munrow’s Early Music Consort who played the part of the onstage ensemble described above in the original 1972 Covent Garden performance—albeit barely audibly.\(^\text{18}\) Collaborations between Munrow and Davies were numerous enough to warrant further investigation, and Davies’ ensemble, the Fires of London, was programmed alongside the Early Music Consort in concerts which celebrated both the new and the ancient (albeit an often newly discovered or interpreted form of ancient).\(^\text{19}\)

Davies and Munrow were similar in their enthusiasm—admirable among ‘serious’ artists—for reaching, and indeed challenging, ears outside of their respective bubbles.\(^\text{20}\) This nexus of modernist excess and early music innovation coming together in a challenging manifestation of popular culture explodes, compellingly, in their collaboration with Ken Russell for his 1971 film \textit{The Devils}. Indeed, Russell also embodies an entirely complementary, and particularly British, type of post-war avant-garde cultivated in the context of BBC patronage and capable of straddling pop-cultural and avant-garde identities.\(^\text{21}\) It begs the question: how might the opera have looked if Russell had directed it, as Davies had originally conceived? \textit{The Devils} is one possible answer.

Now considered a cult classic, \textit{The Devils} had a score composed by Peter Maxwell Davies, and Munrow’s Early Music Consort provided pre-existent diegetic music on period instruments.\(^\text{22}\) Occurring on a spectrum somehow consistent with Russell’s pop-epics \textit{Tommy} and \textit{Lisztomania} (both of which do much also to melt distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low), \textit{The Devils’} taboo-busting modernistic vision of seventeenth-century French witch trials shares much with \textit{Taverner}: in its confrontational style, its disruptive expressionism, and its aestheticisation of anachronism. \textit{Taverner} and \textit{The Devils} mark a particular moment in
British cultural history, and Figures 9.2 and 9.3 demonstrate visible aesthetic congruencies between the two.23

<COMP: Place Figure 9.2 Here> Rehearsal of 1972 ROH performance of Taverner

<COMP: Place Figure 9.3 Here> Urban Grandier (Oliver Reed) enters his show trial for making deals with the Devil in Ken Russell’s The Devils (1971)

Early music here, and indeed ‘earliness’ as it might appear in a film (such as The Devils), is not doing anything as simple as mere historical reproduction. Instead, the synergy of a very old and a very new does much to radically reinvent (or recompose) a time we otherwise could never experience, nor truly reproduce. The influence of a sort of then ‘authentic’ early music in this process—laid bare on stage for all its innate theatricality—is also interesting. Indeed, its presence ironically situates the opera not in its sixteenth-century setting, but, more than anything else, in the 1970s. It becomes, moreover, the intersection at which the so-called high-modernism of Peter Maxwell Davies and (if we take Taruskin’s formulation) Munrow’s authentistic performance practice are able to meet the mass-audience contexts of popular music and cinema, contributing to complex and little understood elisions between the ‘high’ and the ‘low’ in British post-war culture.

Arianna, anachronism, and the crisis of historicity

Alexander Goehr’s Arianna, the story of Theseus’s abandonment of the eponymous lead character on the island of Naxos, is, in the composer’s own words, a ‘recomposition’ of Monteverdi’s lost L’Arianna. Originally performed 1608, all we have left of L’Arianna is Ottavio Rinuccini’s libretto and the Lamento d’Arianna, which has survived in several popular arrangements and was published separately by Monteverdi as a five-voice madrigal in 1614. This is reflective of a career-long fascination with internalising history and tradition which, Goehr himself has noted, was always ‘less explicit’ than his Manchester

*Arianna* is free, for example, of the kinds of excessive interpretative strategies associated with an earlier generation of historically informed early music practice reproduced, on the operatic stage, in *Taverner*. Its ‘earliness’ is more mannered and intellectual, and this mirrors the ‘maturation’ of early music after 1975: a maturation typified in the ‘acapella heresy’ debate and the movement to concert hall ‘serious chamber music’ receptions for early music, particularly in British contexts (see Page, 1997, p. 25). That *Arianna* is an altogether more conservative work than *Taverner*, then, is unsurprising, and ‘serious’ art only diverged from popular culture in the intervening years. Goehr, looking back, calls attention to the broader conservative cultural and political trajectory taken after the relatively free artistic milieu of the 1960s and 1970s, as leading to stifling ‘bureaucratisation and sterilisation’ and a crisis for ‘modern classical music’ (in Palmer, 2015, p. 202). This in turn is reflected back, negatively, onto the composer. Take Dai Griffiths’s indictment of the ‘Grammar Schoolboy Music’ published in 1995, wherein a formerly radical generation of composers is refuged as an avant-garde establishment, against which there is progressive ‘art school’ tradition that revels in punk, camp, and pop. ‘Grammar schoolboys like myths and legends, and love Greek and Latin myths’ Griffiths says on the eve of *Arianna*, and ‘no one wants to hear it’ (1995, pp. 143–145).

Griffiths does offer a glimmer of hope, however, and ‘grammar schoolboy music’, he concedes, can be interesting, but only when ‘it stops being grammar schoolboy music: when it ‘discovers’ tonality, when it ‘celebrates’ some unusual instrument’ (p. 143). *Arianna*, fortunately enough then, is a lively concatenation of melodious dialogue, madrigal-like choruses, and instrumental sinfonias performed by a period-sized ensemble that incorporates the anachronistic, in the form of an electric guitar, a bass clarinet, and two soprano
saxophones alongside flute (doubling on sopranino recorders), strings, and an array of percussion. If contemporary music followed early music into Griffiths’s historical ‘grammar schoolboy’ bind, it was not, at least, without a way out, or through.

<COMP: Place Figure 9.4 Here> Cover of Arianna piano reduction score (© Schott Music Ltd., London) alongside Ricciardo Amadino’s frontispiece for Monteverdi’s Lamento d’Arianna.

Designed in the style of a Monteverdian Amadino score, Goehr’s cover (Figure 9.4) is a striking metaphor for the music itself. And, like the opera, it demonstrates a playful approach to both chronology and authorship. Indeed, the superficial authenticity of its design calls attention to its own contradictory truth—the modern composer’s name—and the opera score combines the old and the new in a similarly porous and anachronistic way. Arianna oscillates, according to Arnold Whittall, ‘stylistically between virtual recreation in a modern timbral context’—like Schoenberg’s Suite in G—and confrontational ‘derangement’—such as in Stravinsky’s Pulcinella (1998, p. 55). Of this treatment of musical history in contemporary costume (or perhaps vice versa), Paul Griffiths suggests that ‘whether in the lament or in what surrounds it, the musical language of 1608 sounds through freshly’ (1998). It is as though, he says, Monteverdi’s musical milieu is ‘patinated or observed through layers of pearl’. These sentiments from two well-connected British commentators of contemporary music echo, perhaps too obviously, Goehr’s own description (from the concert programme note) of the work. Nevertheless, the idea is an alluring one:

The listener should perceive both in the successive and simultaneous dimensions of the score, the old beneath the new and the new arising from the old. We are to see a mythological and ancient action, interpreted by a 17th-century poet in a modern theatre.

(Goehr, 1995)
Unlike *Taverner’s* jarring expressionism, then, there is a continuum in *Arianna* where it is not clear where the old and new begin or end and, while it demonstrably looks backwards in time for inspiration, its modernistic ambiguities distinguish it from a purely historicist work. History is not so much brought into conflict with the present as made to sit side-by-side with it, unresolved.

For this reason, perhaps, some critics were confused at the time of its premiere, and Tom Sutcliffe’s highly critical review suggests that *Arianna* feels ‘unnatural’ (1995, pp. 610–611). The ‘gentle melodic manners’, he says, seemed to mimic the musical language of the Renaissance only to an extent, but it is not ‘impelled by the reasons that created the style in the early 1600s’ (p. 611). While Sutcliffe feels an implied ‘terpsichorean energy’, he is disappointed that it never turns ‘into anything memorable’. There is something at play in his critique of what no less an authority than Fredric Jameson has called ‘the crisis of historicity’. It is apt to the arguments of this chapter that Jameson’s targets would ordinarily be examples of ‘low’ culture and not the high modernism of an Alexander Goehr figure.

The crisis of historicity is part of a package of critique Jameson casts upon the so-called cultural logic of postmodernism. Jameson has it that this crisis is observed in the loss of an organic relationship between history as it once was and the lived experience (1991, p. 22). Cursorily, this might best be understood as the pop-art appropriation of the past for superficial reasons; to unpack that further still, Jameson refers to the ‘the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion’ (p. 18). Transposed to music, we might see this in the techniques of musical history (originally developed in tonal contexts) employed, instead, for their residual qualities: texture, allusion, etc. This is part of the familiar critique of postmodernity, wherein the loss of ‘progress’ and ‘metanarrative’ suggests that artworks, supposedly, seem no longer to ‘represent the historical past’. They instead come to ‘represent our ideas and stereotypes about that past […] which thereby[…] becomes “pop history”’ (p. 25).
With that in mind, consider two contrasting scenes from *Arianna*. First, the lament (the famous ‘Lasciatemi morire’)—when it appears in Scene 6—preserves with care the original Italian libretto save for only a few minor editorial alterations. But it is complicated by an additional trans-temporal layer, a crackling 78-rpm recording of the Lamento sung by Kathleen Ferrier (a recognisable voice to an older generation of British music lovers) heard ‘from afar’ following a brief burst of percussion. A contemporary ‘reharmonisation’ of the lament, in which the original melody is mostly preserved follows. There are alterations, however: an initial widening of time between phrases, for example, and a displacement of the third phrase (‘e che volete voi che mi conforte’) up by an octave serves to build tension. This is mirrored by the accompaniment which alters the dramatic contour of the original lament quite intensely. It breaks with a figurative vocal flourish and thereafter recedes. The obligatory descending bassline is, initially, reinforced in the obscene and growling low register of the bass clarinet—a sonically anachronistic depth in register—and though the musical language is dominated by a kind of modal logic, it is nevertheless voiced in a distinctly non-tonal way so as to underline Arianna’s professed despair. This section culminates with a reflective chorus of fisherman and stripped-back accompaniment.

At the other end of its expressive framework, *Arianna* adorns its chorale numbers in madrigalian attire, interspersed with affected instrumental interludes and sinfonias. Indeed, woody sopranino recorder textures persist in the high registers (like a call back to the time of *Taverner*) and folksy percussive syncopation does, at least, gesture towards dance-like or terpsichorean energies. One particularly direct instance of this occurs in the middle of Scene 4 (‘Avventurose genti’) where a skeletal interlude dominated by strings gives way to a strictly diatonic five-voice harp and tambourine accompanied chorus. Barring a couple of instances of abrupt juxtaposition between said choruses and interludes, the musical past is replicated as if without hint of irony; there is no sense of (an at least overt) pastiche or parody. This more overtly ‘authentic’ sound world sits at one pole of Goehr’s operatic spectrum, with the lament
at the other. Two disparate musical dialects occur, consistent in the context of the opera as a whole and transitioning into one another with a surprising degree of smoothness.

*Arianna*, then, seems both to exemplify and to challenge those logics of criticism that might be levied against other products of medievalist pop culture. Indeed, it has a certain learned quality to it, and it neither embraces nor disavows pastiche or parody entirely, perhaps even inviting analysis as though it were a sincere effort at historically informed composition and (re)completion. Upon closer inspection, however, this is not the case. *Arianna* is a recomposition of an imagined non-existent object and therefore takes a very real delight playing, it seems, with the idea of the representational notion of the simulacrum. By looking both forwards and backwards, but existing in neither the past nor the present, *Arianna* proves itself strikingly new.

Anachronism is perhaps the most instructive tool, then, through which some of the abovementioned logics of criticism are best challenged. But, in the timeless and mythologised world of Goehr’s Greek theatre (as mediated by Monteverdi’s musical Renaissance), which element sits outside of time so as to be anachronistic: the past in the present, or the present in the past? Joseph Luzzi (2009, p. 70) has observed that anachronism can help produce ‘aesthetically productive temporal fissures’, so as to ‘subvert a priori and potentially reductive belief in the objective historicity of an aesthetic form, especially when this same creative representation emerges as a challenge to a visceral historical crisis’ (p. 82).

While Luzzi’s discussion is limited to key literary texts, additional musical layers (each with their own sets of temporal invocations) have the potential both to complicate and to refocus his position yet further. Anachronistic agents in both these operas exist half in, and half out of operas’ necessarily complex diegetic or phenomenal framework: coming to include references to plainchant, raspy shawm-like textures, the low hum of the bass-clarinet in a period reharmonisation of a lament, Kathleen Ferrier’s voice (further mediated through
crackling rpm recording technology), and the complexly corrupted mannerisms of a resurrected Renaissance accompaniment underneath a modal madrigal.

If, as Luzzi claims, literary anachronism is critical because it produces knowledge that subverts our ‘rational and empirical’ understanding of the past, works like *Arianna* and *Taverner*—more than simply articulating a type of post-historical temporal crisis—belong also to a tradition that does much also to reconstruct the historical continuities they call into question. To this end, it is helpful once again to see opera through more popular lenses. Anachronisms serve ‘essential’ functions in historic and medieval film, acting so as to reach audiences—audiences who are often excluded from opera scholarship—through communicative shorthand bridging, according to Pugh and Weisl, ‘yesterday and today’ (2013, p. 98). Through necessary subversions of authenticity, opera speaks a more common language than we give it credit; a language, which, in the context of late modernism complicates strict divisions, both of the *then* and the *now*, but also of the high and the low.

* * *

This chapter has traced a short history of modernist engagement with the distant past in international and then national communities. Through this, two contrasting case studies, based on works by two closely aligned composers, have begun the task of situating contemporary opera into broader cultural and historical contexts. These are contexts which, in these two case studies, see the complex interactions of modernist music with early music interpretation and other types of popular culture, on a shared spectrum. Alongside other medievalist trends, early music becomes a refracting lens through which we might appreciate, explain, or understand the avant-garde, especially in its relation to our cultural recent history.

It is a central theme of this book—and, in particular, this third section—that the creative engagement with the past is part of an ongoing and multifaceted dialogue in which two non-contiguous historical moments can be bridged creatively. It is moreover the case that the efforts of composers like Peter Maxwell Davies and Alexander Goehr also make unique
contributions to this tradition. This chapter demonstrates that this impulse might also have particularly local or national manifestations: an idea worthy of further investigation. The works in question animate, and problematise, what it means to understand the past creatively. In doing so, they contribute to the diverse and interrelated realities wherein the past continues to inform the present and the present informs the past.

Works cited


1 This is noted in much Birtwistle literature. See Michael Hall (1984), Robert Adlinton (2000), and Jonathan Cross (2000).
3 In a recent Radio 3 interview on Music Matters with Peter Maxwell Davies and Harrison Birtwistle (2014), when asked by Tom Service why they were drawn to medieval music, they blithely replied that they were looking for music which was not in sonata form. Considered closely, this sentiment speaks to the notion of early music as something quite subversive, a theme taken up later in the present chapter.
4 Indeed, modernism has become something of a rallying cry for successive generations of self-identifying ‘art’ composers. The enduring legacy of what it means to be a musical modernist in the latter half of the twentieth century and since has been the subject of research studies, see for example Heile (2009) and Guldbrandsen and Johnson (2015).
5 Interestingly, British composers would, arguably, later reinvigorate the Darmstadt Ferienkurse. For more details see Christopher Fox (1993).
6 For further information regarding Lutyens’s relationship with early music see Parsons (2010).
7 For Weir’s relationship with tradition, see Colton (2010).
8 See Maria Ryan (2017) in this collection.
9 Edward Macan (1997, p. 40) makes the argument, for example, that a progressive rock music interest in vocal arrangements has a great deal to with the popularity of English late medieval music, and, indeed, the affluent backgrounds of many of the musicians participating in that movement.
10 Peter Maxwell Davies is mentioned only in passing via a discussion of Munrow’s involvement with the Ken Russell film The Devils (for which Davies composed incidental music) (Young, 2010, p. 202).
11 Grammar schools are characteristic of an opening up—albeit a limited one—in British education post-war, and for the first time people from formerly ‘provincial’ backgrounds became prominent in public and civic life in large numbers. With the introduction of comprehensive schools later in the century, this situation becomes somewhat more complex, and the notion of a ‘grammar schoolboy’ as a conservative figure in British music is later playfully taken up by, for example, Dai Griffiths (1995).
12 For some interesting, if preliminary, thoughts on the relationship between popular music and modernist music, see Metzer (2015). By drawing some of the connections I have in this chapter I hope, much like Metzer, to melt some of the divisions we arbitrarily uphold between so-called popular music and the avant-garde.
13 For further details about the countercultural connections in avant-garde British music theatre of the time see Hall (2015).
14 What I am describing here is a later manifestation of the local or ‘anthropological turn’ in British modernist literature taken up by Jed Esty (2003), and applied to music by J. P. E. Harper-Scott (2008), but to an earlier generation of William Walton (et al.).
15 For further analysis detailing this see Beard (2009) and Arnold (1972).
16 The In nomine as a form has been in renewal in the last 60 years, and notable In Nomines have been composed Peter Maxwell Davies and Brian Ferneyhough and more recently by Bryn Harrison, for example. Even non-British composers, such as György Kurtág have used it. A nice example is the CD In nomine by Ensemble Recherche (2015).
17 For an interesting account of BBC and state patronage for British avant-garde music at the time see Addison (2016). Indeed, while many of those involved in dispensing with or adjudicating funds for the arts were of an aristocratic and ‘narrow self-perpetuating milieu’, this could not always be said for the composers who benefited most whose backgrounds were much more varied (p. 11).
18 Davies considered the performance less than satisfactory and recalls that Munrow’s offstage group was reduced to ‘distant squeaking’ (Classical-music.com, 2009)
19 More work could be done to make this argument, but beside cases covered in this chapter, a cursory search through BBC online Genome archive (printed Radio Times listings 1923–2009) yields the following example: a BBC Proms concert (no. 74) from 1973 http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/schedules/radio3/1974-08-29.
20 See Breen (2017) in this collection.
21 For further pertinent details about Ken Russell, see Flanagan (2009).
22 Further details of the collaboration can be located in Crouse (2012).
23 This is substantiated by comments Ken Russell himself made in relation to his involvement with Taverner which evidently never came to pass: ‘I’d already met [Peter Maxwell Davies] in connection with an opera I’m going to do at Covent Garden… in fact his opera… it’s on a religious subject very similar to The Devils in so far it’s about the corruption of religion, the corruption of a human being and, and the forces of religion get to work on him… so when it came around to find a composer for the film there was only one possible choice’ (interview with Ken Russell at the time of film, Director of the Devils, 1971) (Russell, 2012).
24 Anachronism has been a recurrent subject in this collection, see Cook (2017).