

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Intertextuality and (modernist) medievalism in British post-war music

Book Section

How to cite:

Kolassa, Alexander (2021). Intertextuality and (modernist) medievalism in British post-war music. In: Kostka, Violetta; Castro, Paulo Ferreira de and Everett, William eds. *Intertextuality in Music: Dialogical Composition*. London: Routledge, pp. 87–102.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2020 The Author

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.4324/9781003092834-10>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's [data policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Abstract: British composers in the latter half of the twentieth century pursued a belated version of musical modernism rebelling against the establishment by ‘returning’ to little known medieval manuscripts. The contradiction here is an interesting one, and what the author identifies here as modernist medievalism—the contradictory appropriation of the medieval to expressly forward-thinking ends—is explicitly intertextual. This chapter argues that a modernist composer conjuring the medieval is doing something less than the literal representation of an ‘authentic’ past than they are engaging in a nexus of imaginary (re)representations of a non-contiguous and Other, shared, version of history, one that elides any such reified notions of the ‘high’ and the ‘low’ and unites disparate fields of artistic activity. Beginning with a brief summary of twentieth century precedents focussed principally on the ‘Tudor medievalism’ of, among others, Benjamin Britten, the author turns his attention to the contrasting medievalisms of Peter Maxwell Davies and Harrison Birtwistle. And specifically, their career-long appropriation of the works of earlier composers John Taverner and Guillaume de Machaut (respectively). For the former example, Davies entered into existent intertextual networks incorporating *In Nomine* and *Dies Irae* chants; whereas in the latter case, Birtwistle repeatedly rearranges, deforms, and disguises the techniques of the medieval poet-composer.

Key words: medievalism, modernism, Peter Maxwell Davies, Harrison Birtwistle, Machaut, Dies irae

Biography: Alexander Kolassa is a Lecturer in Music at the Open University. His research currently concerns the intersections of musical modernism, medievalism (which is to say the modern medieval imaginary), and popular culture: in the concert hall, on stage, and on screen. His research has been published by Routledge (as in his co-edited collection *Recomposing the Past: Representations of Early Music on Stage and Screen*, 2018) and Boydell & Brewer, and he has published work in sound studies and early music journals on subjects ranging from British contemporary opera, music in *Game of Thrones*, New Media, videogames, and Russian cinema. As a composer, Alexander’s music has been performed nationally.

Intertextuality and (modernist) medievalism in British post-war music

Alexander Kolassa, *The Open University* <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9837-581X>

The medieval *text* (literary, musical, or otherwise) is, at least from the work-centred mono-perspective of modernity, ontologically unstable. Such instability is the very thing to which theories of intertextuality aspire; medieval texts are palimpsests and patchworks, characterised by *mouvance* and (multi-)author anonymity. But what happens when artistic modernism, replete (implicitly or explicitly) with its ideologies of progress and ‘newness’, appropriates the materials and sounds (imagined or otherwise) of the Middle Ages? That intertextuality can be applied widely in canons of musical modernism is common knowledge, but in a specifically ‘medievally’ inflected form, the intertextual study of modernism can do much to disrupt modernity’s long-presumed linear temporalities.

This chapter engages that question by examining medievalism in the post-war musical avant-garde, especially in Britain, focussing on the work of Peter Maxwell Davies (1934-2016) and Harrison Birtwistle (1934-). It is an enduring contradiction that a radical generation of composers who emerged during the 1950s expressly influenced by the ultra-modernism of the Darmstadt school, would gravitate towards medieval sources as a site for core materials and compositional processes. The ‘invented tradition’ of the medieval—borrowed or quoted and transformed—serves a double function: a subversive Other to nineteenth-century musical Germanism, and a legitimising form of history grounded in another form of Britishness. In so far as the medieval represents a contested temporal space of, perhaps, limitless possibility, the label ‘medievalism’ here has less, I propose, to do with any ‘authentic’ evocation of the period than it does with the imaginative and contradictory, yet also productive, impulses the label seeks to sustain.

To describe a form of ‘modernist medievalism’, one grounded in intertextual practices redolent of past *and* present and arguably bridging or combining the two, means engaging in new ways with its attendant logics of temporal dislocation and anachronism. This further disrupts overtly composer-, work-, or indeed progress-centric perspectives of the repertoire. What I call British modernist medievalism situates its musical subject matter in the dialogic intersection of the scholarly with the mainstream, popular, or even fantastical, and shows how a powerful and shared view of a past (one that,

indeed, never did go away) continues to transform, and be transformed by, our present, and even our future.

Medievalism and intertextuality

Books in the imagined medieval library of Umberto Eco, as remarked upon by Michael Klein, speak ‘among themselves’ (2004, 1). The medieval book seems hardly to be a book at all, radically open, encompassing everything. That Michael Klein turns to Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* at the start of his book *Intertextuality in Western Art Music* is telling. That particular novel is, after all, a work of imaginative literary medievalism as *present* as it is *past*, and it is the popularly reimagined Middle Ages as much as any real or ‘authentic’ one that matters most when envisioning what it might offer us in the present study of intertextuality. Indeed, it might then be said that a strain of medievalism permeates the very foundations of the study of intertextuality itself. The thought of none other than the early theorist of literary polyphony Mikhail Bakhtin, after all, has a medievalist bent: his conception of the carnivalesque, characterised as it is by types of irony and subversive, base humour, and the unravelling of order and authorship, is itself an imaginative leap, reinventing and reinterpreting a medieval act of social co-creativity to better understand the novel in the present day.¹

The Middle Ages, as noted by Eco in ‘The Return of the Middle Ages’, a text largely responsible for defining the term ‘neomedievalism’, undergoes a process of permanent rediscovery (67). This ‘rediscovery’ has been ongoing since the—elusive—moment it ended: in the Enlightenment it was maligned as superstitious and barbarous, and certainly since the flowering of industrial modernity in the early- and mid-nineteenth century it was viewed with a, perhaps, more romantic hue.² The Medieval is, then, modernity’s suppressed Other, a kind of Freudian id to the present’s ego: a hidden repository, site of unresolved trauma, and uncanny co-agent in the collective cultural gestalt. It is, I argue, quite impossible to disentangle the historical or ‘authentic’ Middle Ages from its highly contested, dialogically (and thus intertextually) conceived, set of afterlives. Such as the medieval period remains, in its ubiquity, a part of us, of the present, and subject to constant reimagination or renegotiation, evoked in literary and architectural revivals, national propaganda, as well as movements of artistic renewal both

progressive and reactionary—not to mention its ubiquitous presence in popular culture, and old and new media.

Medievalism Studies, then, concerns itself with exploring this imaginative interdisciplinary and intertextual space that the Middle Ages occupies today; here a pre-modernity, broadly conceived, that encompasses the historiographically ambiguous space between the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and signifying a form of the past that is Other and to which we are not directly connected. This is a site where Richard Utz identifies the ‘fusion of creative and scholarly engagement with the past’ (2011, 102). In this way, it does not simply engage with the superficially medieval, but undertakes to explore how culture (be it ‘high’ or ‘low’) creates what it means *to be* medieval, or is in some way profoundly redolent, productively so, of a period of time lost to our sense and experience. If the medieval has provided a sort of template for the ‘postmodern’³—and in this way it is no wonder that medievalism as a discipline thrives in the era of transmedia convergence culture and the digital *intertext*—it is less to do with any break or rupture (hermeneutic or epistemological) in time than it is about the continuities engendered. Artistic modernism, the relic of an increasingly lost era of progress may yet be made present by history’s texts.

Modernism and medievalism

It is often remarked that the past should inform us in the present, lest we repeat it. The cliché says much about modernity, its attendant ideologies, and its relationship to history. History is something modernity moves away from, and modernism is its artistic corollary: architectural brutalism, literary stream of consciousness, the emancipation of dissonance. Nevertheless, there is much medievalism to excavate in the modernist repertoires which could destabilise any such linear, teleological, sense of chronology. In this way, medievalism shares much with the study of intertextuality, and as Klein notes, one of the latter’s principal affects is a sort of chronological subversion, affording the movement both backwards and forwards in time so that, in his example at least, Chopin may become ‘the precursor to Bach’ (2004, 8). Consider instead the inverse: letting the present inform the past so as to not repeat the latter. In this way progress, or the future (as well as its role in the modernist project), takes on new meanings.

Modernism has been profoundly medieval since it ‘began’. Larry Scanlon, for example, sees in Ezra Pound—‘modernism’s greatest impresario’ and ‘frustrated medievalist’ (2010, 838)—a contradiction that seems foundational to the whole endeavour: the poet’s injunction to ‘make it new’ appears, paradoxically, in his richly illusory literary style, to be in fact ‘make it medieval’. Pound’s overt (even totalitarian) modernist vanguardism belies an incoherent desire demanding at once a complete ‘break with the past’ that ‘actually ensures that the past can never be forgotten’ (839). Jonathan Ulliot, too, sees in the foundational texts of literary modernism (by Joyce, Eliot, as well as, later, Kafka and Beckett, for example) an enigmatic species of medievalism in the form of its renewal of the ‘grail quest’ narrative. In such modern ‘quests’, elaborate allusion in conjunction with an aesthetic of failure might both ‘dilate’ the ordinary into a mythic or cyclical heroic form and likewise condition us to ‘let go of our traditional expectations of how a text moves towards coherence’, rendering it open, refusing closure, etc. (2015, 15-16). In both cases, the lack (or failure) of reconciliation, of past and present, ring out strongly as markers of their modernistic identities: precipitated in both cases, too, by an intertextuality both strongly modern but enduringly medieval.

The same tensions animate trajectories in musical modernism. Wagner’s own radical innovations with regard to traditional tonality seems to have been made possible over a series of medievalist operas (for example *Tristan und Isolde* and *Parsifal*)—and, indeed, does any musical moment carry more significant intertextual capital than the Tristan chord? Ulliot identifies a kind of ur-modernist intertext here, citing Eliot’s *The Waste Land* as a libretto to a Wagnerian opera (2015, 63). Wagner’s own methodologies formed complex intertextual networks with other works in German opera (see Moortele 2013), but his appropriation of medieval subject matter was more than skin deep, evoking the period by way of a recreation of the medieval *interlace* structuring principle: engendering multiplicities of voice and time and disrupting modern narrative teleology within broader intertextual frameworks (see Harper-Scott 2009).

It is often observed that popular ‘rediscoveries’ of medieval early music are a ‘reaction against the twelve-tone approaches of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern which culminated in a return to audience-accessible, eclectic simpler forms’ (Kreutziger-Herr 1995, 192). But ‘medievalism’ tells a different story. Kreutziger-Herr suggests that at the beginning of the twentieth century there was something about

medieval music that ‘satisfied the desire for something old and something new simultaneously’, appealing to emotion and intellect alike with its ‘artful allusions to numerical systems and theoretical concepts’ (1995, 192). But modernist medievalism is more than superficial, structural appeal and forms itself as part of a wider network of influence.

Of momentous importance to the directions taken by twentieth-century musical moderns, Stravinsky’s early ballets speak to a multiplicity of medievalisms, each carrying its own ideological baggage. These different medievalisms accord roughly with Umberto Eco’s well-known taxonomy, the ‘ten little Middle Ages’ in his formative article ‘The Return of the Middle Ages’ (1986).⁴ For example, such medieval imaginaries as the primitivistic and barbarous (*Rite of Spring*), the fairytale (*Firebird*), or idealised, nationalist, or peasantry medievalisms (*Les Noces*) (on the latter see Mazo 1990). Later in his career Stravinsky evoked a sparser, liturgical, or ‘cathedralised’⁵ Latinate medieval in serial works such as *Canticum Sacrum* (1955) and *Requiem Canticles* (1966). These works, pointing—intertextually or otherwise—backwards towards the forward-looking ultra-modernist Anton Webern who died earlier in 1945, himself trained as a fifteenth-century specialist). Stravinsky’s medievalism’, speaks more broadly to the complex ways in which musical modernity interacts with the medieval past. As Johnathan Cross has noted, it is in the rhythmic domain that Stravinsky, through rhythmic repetition and additive complexity, achieves the suspension of objective time and the realisation of non-directed timelessness which bridges, so Cross argues, the rhythmic innovations of Phillippe de Vitry and the Ars Nova of the early fourteenth century with the present (1998, p. 84). Adorno famously saw in these repetitious processes the dissolution of subjectivity to mechanical reproduction, but the cyclical return there of the Ars Nova is redolent of intertextuality’s topsy-turvy temporality.

As the twentieth century wore on and performance editions of works by the likes of Guillaume de Machaut became widely available, so too did a thoroughly modernist form of early music (see Taruskin 1988 and Leech 2011, 64). In turn, composers associated with Darmstadt ultra-modernism—Boulez, Stockhausen, among others—reinvented the period for their own ends, seeing a parallel between their own interests and numerical structures such as isorhythm. From the 1950s to the mid-1970s Boulez’s concert series *Domaine Musical*, which took place at Paris’ Théâtre Marigny, became a prominent public forum for premieres of new works that habitually juxtaposed the radically new

against supposed medieval ‘masterpieces’ (O’Hagan 2016, 187). It might be said of these composers’ overly formalistic reduction (or misreading) of the likes of Machaut, that—in the words of Elizabeth Eva Leech—they ‘saw in [Machaut] a conveniently inspirational “other” who allowed them to reject the lingering ghost of expressive romanticism and focus on structure’ (2011, 61). But in spite of modernism’s expressed scientism, it is interesting to consider a subversive sort of disruption in the intertext of the *Domaine Musical*—of Darmstadt medievalism—and the ways in which Boulez is the precursor. That medievalism may colour, or reanimate modernism, just as modernism had originally intended to colonise the medieval.

British medievalism and its origins

Before moving to the British ‘new music’ analogue of the above mentioned ultra- or high-modernist medievalism, it is worth briefly sketching out existent traditions of medievalism in British music. Much of the thought accompanying these assume, rightly or wrongly, that Britain has a specific and noteworthy relationship with its medieval past, one to which it has, perhaps, special access. Chris Jones, on poetry specifically, sees in medievalism a kind of native British tradition, calling it the ‘process by which all forms of cultural expression in the British Isles build for themselves myths of origin’ (2016, 14). Utz, too, highlights the currency of the term ‘medievalism’ in Britain, which he attributes to the ‘unique continuity postmedieval British subjects have felt with their medieval past’ (Utz 2011, 105); the aesthetic evidence of which lie, in particular, in the nineteenth century Gothic revival architectural and literary movements, as well as in the artistic anti-modern modernity of the Pre-Raphaelites, and even the socialist Utopianism of William Morris. Utz, therefore, sees the importance of medieval historiographies as having been the preserve of enthusiasts, amateurs, or artists, with the study of medieval sources only becoming absorbed into the Academy very late in the day (at the turn of the twentieth century). This is in stark contrast with the continent, where distance from the past, wrought by war and revolution, facilitated a much quicker academizing of the subject (Utz 2011, 105). Deborah Heckert traces precisely the consequences of this difference as developments in (oftentimes generalist) medieval historiography intersect with the pastoral or folk medievalism of pre- and interwar composers like Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gustav Holst. British medievalism comes to represent

here a negotiation between continental trends ‘in light of British historicist leanings’ (2020, 337). Vaughan Williams (et al.) were ostensibly modernists, she argues, albeit ones searching for a specific English version of modernism that walks a ‘tight line between a conservative backwards glance to history and the forward-looking demands of contemporary music’ (337). That modernism turned out to be medievalism.

Medievalism is once again a complicating vector, and through its lens we see a British musical tradition that appears to be relatively conservative in its pastoralist preoccupations, negotiating its own history against the backdrop of cosmopolitan modernity. That these tensions keep appearing in the work of subsequent generations of musicians is no coincidence, and narratives of renewal *through* the past are a recurrent theme in modern British history. This is also the case in 1950s movement of New Elizabethanism—a form of Tudor medievalism—which saw in a moment of post-Coronation optimism a tricky negotiation of the politics of imperial decline, Cold War British identity, and the rise of the Welfare State (see Wiebe 2012, 109-150) and during which Benjamin Britten and his own appropriation of Tudor medievalism and allusion was fully, even centrally, implicated (consider, for example, the medieval text setting ‘Dirge’ in 1945’s *Serenade for Tenor, Horn, and Strings*, the mystery play inspired *Noye’s Fludde* from 1958, and 1953s collaborative *Variations on an Elizabethan Theme*, and more). Britten would, Heather Wiebe argues, leverage a ‘utopian medievalism’ to bridge ‘past and present, heavenly and earthly, and high and low culture’ (2011, 12 and 47). Though successive generations of increasingly avant-garde composers take, in many respects, a different path, these tensions and paradoxes continue to play out in evolving and historically contingent ways, especially with regards to the complex interplay of popular and scholarly receptions of the medieval. Medievalism—as conceived here, at least—articulates both continuities and discontinuities, serving as a vehicle of temporal rupture, as well as constructing a framework for the articulation of types of Britishness (both real and imaginary).

In music, practically speaking, medievalism invariably takes the form of quotation and allusion, or at least the absorption of some kind of historical compositional process. Sources from the past, oftentimes medieval melodies or chant, become the intertext that runs roughshod throughout history. Musical medievalism in this guise elides rigid ‘high’ and ‘low’ binarisms. Take for example the case

of the medieval round ‘Sumer is Icumen in’, whose storied and contested history, rediscovery, attributions and misattributions, and varied appropriations sees it weaving—as intertext—a tapestry combining historiography with film (whistled in 1938’s *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, sung to unnerving effect at the end of 1973’s *The Wicker Man*), popular music, symphonic works by the aforementioned Vaughan Williams (*Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*, 1910), and Britten (*Gloriana*, 1953) as well Maxwell Davies (*Worldes Blis*, 1969) (see Colton 2017).

Medievalism and New Music Manchester

A watershed moment in British music, Phillip Rupprecht identifies 1956 as a sort of birthyear of a new ‘British music of progressive, modernist outlook’ (2015a, 19). On January 9 that year, at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, a group called ‘New Music Manchester’ (including then twentysomething composers Alexander Goehr, Harrison Birtwistle, and Peter Maxwell Davies) hosted a concert of ostensibly forward-looking ‘modernist’ music⁶ of the type rarely heard in Britain at the time. The ‘New Music Manchester’ revolution brought what was perceived to be a continental brand of musical modernism to British shores, one which, presumably, disavowed the past (as narratives of modernist rupture tend to insist) and reasserted the ontological integrity—wholeness—of the wholly ‘new’ work. But, as Rupprecht notes, a received caricature of this pronounced avant-garde strand of late British modernism has generally downplayed its local, traditional, or otherwise eclectic and vernacular characteristics, instead prioritising their works’ formalist and internationalist qualities in a gesture all too redolent of a broader trend to isolate ‘classical’ music criticism in the arts in the mid and late twentieth century (2015a, 24). Musical modernists of the fifties, Rupprecht says, ‘are invariably assumed to operate at some grand remove from the aesthetics of pop-rock or jazz’ (25).

That a defining feature of these composers’ works would prove to be their interest in medieval music to such an extent as I have stated is well known. But in a manner entirely consistent with earlier-mentioned strains of early music ‘modernism’, that medieval is usually figured to be a mere repository for the teleological present: the past a passive agent in a one-way exchange. Indeed, such accounts dominate the discourse, both in, for example, a 1961 profile of Peter Maxwell Davies by Robert Henderson in *The Musical Times* (where Davies is said to ‘employ medieval compositional techniques,

reinterpreting these according to the *demands* [my emphasis] of the present time' (625), and in the present. Take Paul Griffiths account of these composers being 'quite aware that what they were learning from the recent music of Boulez and Nono had its parallels in the pages of *Musica Britannica*' (2010, 169). But for every reworked medieval 'compositional process' comes a rich web of associations (musical and extra-musical) bound up with the emergent study *and* reception (popular and scholarly) of the period in question (as well as its imaginative correlates). In the concert hall, in the opera house, and in the counterculturally-infused genre of musical theatre an overt sort of medievalism—oftentimes intersecting in striking ways with early music, popular folk music revivals, and television or film—acts with an agency all of its own, coming to colour this distinctly British form of musical modernism.

Peter Maxwell Davies and chant medievalism

Peter Maxwell Davies nailed his modernist credentials to the mast early on in a series of biting articles, denouncing, as in 1959's 'Problems of a British Composer Today', England as a 'fool's paradise' in 'complete ignorance of recent and even distant musical development' and praising dodecaphony as a 'necessary' step forward (32). But beneath his total rejection of nationalism in music and of a century of 'dilettantish' composers (Stanford, Parry, Bantock, etc.), as well as his injunction to 'study Continental thought, understand it, absurd its principles' (33), there emerges the idealisation of a more distant sort of past: as he similarly writes three years earlier in 'The Young British Composer' in 1956, British composers had figured more prominently as innovators 'until the arrival of Handel, Britain produced some of the greatest composers in Europe' (23).

A cursory glance over his early oeuvre reveals Davies' medievalism; many of his titles, for example, eschew the modernist trope of terse or abstract work names, opting instead for a colourful invocation of a medieval (or, indeed, Renaissance) precursor. The *First* (1962) and *Second* (1964) *Taverner Fantasias*, and *Seven In Nomine* (1963-1975), for example breathe life into the 'In Nomine' musical form. That form, fashionable in the Tudor years, was derived from a quotation from sixteenth-century composer John Taverner's *Gloria Tibi Trinitas* mass and generated imitative counterpoint around a cantus firmus drawn from the mass's chant source. A musical intertext suggestive of ancient British musical glories, the 'In Nomine' has experienced something of a revival in contemporary

music.⁷ Similarly, the *Missa super l'homme armé* (1968) and *St Thomas Wake* (1968) stage theatrical musical corruptions—the former of the medieval anonymous mass setting of a secular song, the latter of works by English Tudor composer John Bull—transforming music of the past into a satirical foxtrot, and *Worldes Blis* (1969), a ‘motet for orchestra’ also seeks to discover, over 37 continuous minutes, the medieval monody from which it gets its name (as well as invoking other medieval melodic fragments including the previously mentioned ‘Sumer is Icumen in’). The operas *Taverner* (1971) and *The Martyrdom of St. Magnus* (1976) bring a theatrical form of avant-garde medievalism to the stage, complete with era-typical costumery and, in the case of the former, an onstage early music consort.⁸

Davies’ medievalism is deeply intertextual. It does not just engage in acts of (ironic and otherwise) musical quotation, but quotations of quotations too, thus reactivating traditions and techniques of musical borrowing, usually adopting the raw medieval materials and compositional processes that, at the time, we subject to new understanding (and misunderstanding) in scholarly and popular contexts. By composing an ‘In Nomine’ or a ‘L’homme armé’, Davies imbricates himself in distinctly sticky medieval intertextuality. Indeed, for Davies the (not so new) resource of plainchant could function almost exactly as a dodecaphonic tone row, for he opined in 1960 that he ‘sees no objection to using another number of notes to the series’ (44). But it is clear that such chant is anything but a random collection of pitches, and studies in intertextuality teach us to resist such essentialisations.

The *Dies irae* chant has a storied history as musical intertext (Gloag 2012, 38): ‘rediscovered’ in the nineteenth century, its gothic and funerary associations exploited by the likes of Berlioz (*Symphonie Fantastique*, 1830), Liszt (*Totentanz*, 1849) and Saint-Saëns (*Danse macabre*, 1874) as well as many composers in the twentieth century. The initial descending tetrachord will find immediate purchase with even casual listeners as a musical signifier heard widely in canons of popular music and cinema (most notable in Wendy Carlos’ score for *The Shining* [1980]).⁹ Davies was—consciously or not—forming another node in the chant’s rich signficatory web when he used it extensively in his score for Ken Russell’s cult historical drama *The Devils* (1971).¹⁰

<INSERT EXAMPLE 1 HERE>

Caption: Example 1 Peter Maxwell Davies, ‘a fantasia in the Dies irae’/‘Titles’, bars 1-9, transcribed from collections at the British Library (MS 71263-71264: 1971)

The title sequence, called ‘a fantasia in the Dies Irae’ in the concert *Suite from The Devils*, follows a highly camp musical performance scene in which France’s King Louis XIII recreates in dance Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* set to music by Michael Praetorius (‘La Bourée’ performed by David Munrow’s Early Music Consort of London). A jump cut to the rotting corpse outside a city’s walls is then accompanied by the start of Davies’ score, a slowly unfolding alto flute line accompanied by thunder sheet percussive bursts (ex. 1). A suggestively dodecaphonic line (the first line, the notes G#, E, A#, C#, D#, A, F#, B, C, D) gives way—as if forming a musical-melodic continuum between the two musical languages—to the familiar Dies irae descending motif starting on E (E, D#, E, C#, D# B C#; indicated with a box in ex. 1). Slow and metallic, the effect is surprisingly subtle, albeit unmistakable. A minute later a funeral procession is heard, the Dies irae appears unadorned, performed in unison, and with strict metric regularity.

This chant forms something of an intertextual chain even within his own work, namely to earlier more expressly serial-sounding compositions as *St. Michael* (1958). Therein, the Dies irae chant is extrapolated according to Davies’ own formulation of the medieval technique of prolation canon, where a melody is varied in different layers according to strict rules of rhythmic diminution or augmentation (See Rupprecht 2015a, 144). In several key scenes in *The Devils*, Davies revisits this very technique, its earlier serial-like formulation reimaged here in absurd and theatrical circumstances, including one plague-ravished scene featuring a sinister comic duo of hack alchemical physicians and a sword fight with a

<INSERT EXAMPLE 2 HERE>

Caption: Example 2 Peter Maxwell Davies, ‘Plague Scene’, bars 1-9, transcribed from collections at the British Library (MS 71263-71264: 1971)

stiff alligator prop. In Davies’ score (ex. 2), the cello (lower voice) sketches out the Dies irae as a cantus firmus, obscured by octave displacement, according to a strict rhythmic scheme that repeats throughout the scene in the style of medieval isorhythm. The top voice, a noisy trumpet, plays the same chant, inverted, also with octave displacement, beginning on an F sharp (a whole-step higher than the opening E in the cello) and at precisely three times faster than the cantus firmus. The effect is noisy and chaotic,

recalling less the composer's own experiments in quasi-medieval serialism than Ken Russell's own cinematic aesthetic of pop-art excess.¹¹

Lisa Colton has commented on Ruskin's theorisation of the role of the 'grotesque' in Gothic art (an early species of literary and artistic medievalism): seeing its evocation of the 'fantastic and ludicrous' (as well as its other spiritual or sublime associations) as a feature of many works of twentieth-century music (2020, 319). Davies, in an essay about realising the early orchestral work *Prolation* (1958), itself a piece exploiting his aforementioned prolation technique, touches on something similar: 'perhaps it is not too fanciful to make a comparison between the present musical structure and *übergreifende Form* of the arches of Gothic architecture, where the form is common to the nave, the windows, the tracery within the windows, and in every instance where an arch can be used, down to the most minor decoration' (1960, 45). Despite the rhetorical tropes of organicist compositional structural unity here, we can yet dig a little deeper than the composer would perhaps allow.¹² Though Davies' writing at the time, infused as it is with modernist invective, goes to lengths to stress the conceptual unity, the integrity of his work as an abstract construct, his actions invite a listening, an experience, of parallel temporalities, of borrowed and fragmentary chant and historical distortion as unstable as a buttressed cathedral, one that also breaks down the medial boundaries of concert hall, opera, and popular film. His mediievally infused music is suspended in an intertextual web of gothic proportions which invites the listener to hear the old as new, and the new as old.

Harrison Birtwistle and Guillaume de Machaut

Harrison Birtwistle—Peter Maxwell Davies' Manchester contemporary—has engaged the work of medieval composer-poet Guillaume de Machaut throughout his career. Birtwistle's medievalism will strike the listener as less obvious than that of Davies, and his music is characteristically free of the latter's ironic quotations, timbres and motivic medieval associations. Nevertheless, commentators such as Jonathan Cross have cited 'neo-medievalism' as being a prominent feature of Birtwistle's music (2000, 11), and as early as 1984 Michael Hall was describing his style as a 'combination of medieval ... and twentieth-century interests' (1984, 9).

It is in the domain of rhythm that much of the dramatic impetus in Birtwistle's music is played out, and specific pitches—the associations they carry—are often sidelines, seemingly the arbitrary carriers of many interdependent interlocking rhythmic cells. Tensions abound in his work between what Rupprecht has elsewhere identified as the 'sounding centrality of musical pulse (...and) the prominence of journeying as a dramatic event' in his rhythmical imagination (2015b, 27). Birtwistle's music embodies the paradox, in musical-temporal terms, of modernist medievalism as I have framed it: of the frisson produced when modern notions of progress meet a cyclical (and intertextual sort of) medieval time. In this sense Birtwistle both borrows and reimagines antiquity, in addition to the medieval, and it is through this chronotopic preoccupation with myth and ritual (and time, thereof) that Birtwistle engages parallel pasts and presents to say something 'new'.

In 1987 Birtwistle curated a series of concerts at London's South Bank Centre around Machaut's *Hoquetus David*. He invited ten composers to create their own arrangements and included his own orchestral version, which became part of *Machaut à ma manière* (1988). (Birtwistle characterises *Machaut à ma manière* as 'really an arrangement' of an earlier arrangement, 'a sort of second stage Chinese whisper' [quoted in Adlington 2000, 173].)

This was not the first time Birtwistle explored *Hoquetus David*. The opening of his 1969 arrangement for flute, clarinet (in C), violin, violoncello, glockenspiel and bells retains the original pitches and rhythmic features. The registral placement, however, is pushed to the extremes of the instruments' ranges. Extended techniques and string harmonics explode the piece across an uncommonly large tibral canvas. While Birtwistle thus draws attention to rhythmic continuities between himself and Machaut, do the pitches become incidental? I do not think so: the arrangement's imaginative sonic profile reinvigorates Machaut's joyful melodic and harmonic colours and is immediately reminiscent of concurrent experiments—including timbral exploration with ancient musical instruments—in the early music and folk music communities at the time. A modernist rejoinder, perhaps, to the shawm-like textures of 1960s historically informed performance, it still speaks to that generation's historical-imaginary ear. As Robert Adlington notes, Birtwistle's arrangement sounds as a kind of amplification of the logic of Machaut's own technique, obsessively manoeuvring material 'between instruments and through registral space' (2000, 74). Indeed, the effect anticipates in strictly

sonic terms the intertextual reality of the medieval motet writ large. *Machaut à ma manière* opens with an arrangement of Machaut's three-voice 'Fons tocius/O livoris feritas/Fera pessima'. Through its collage-like cut-and-paste interjections, the listener is exposed to a kind of polyphony, horizontally as well as vertically. Polyphonic settings like those of Machaut's *Hoquetus* and motet can, as Margaret Bent notes, 'position apparently disparate or incongruous texts in a precise simultaneous relationship' and 'make or receive elaborate textual, musical and intertextual allusions' (2003, 363).

That motet (number 9 in Machaut's cycle) brings its three contrasting Latin texts together in a 'denunciation of sin' albeit, not 'without a sense of redemption' (Robertson 2002, 128). Its complex rhythmic construction, however, isorhythmically organised with its own passages of dense hoqueting, likewise invites repeated hearings (Bent 2003, 387), and this sonic strategy operates in congruence with its textual demands. Though it might be a step too far to argue that Birtwistle's hard-nosed abstract modernism intends to speak to, or comment on, the poetic-spiritual themes of Machaut's own work, the multiplicity of meanings here can only lend more weight to the work as intertext. Indeed, Birtwistle's arrangement anticipates the motet's sense of textual polyphony or 'multi-textedness'—what Adlington has observed in both Machaut and (as only extended in) Birtwistle—drawing the listener across different texts and resisting any such sense that the piece may be perceived as 'a homogenous whole' (2000, 174). Such multi-textedness only underlines and enhances the multiplicity of authorship here: Birtwistle's arrangements (in its original form and the later orchestral piece) dramatize not simply the rhythmic procedures that are so often the focus of Birtwistle studies but also the co-existence in the text, the music itself, of the two composers and their respective time periods. Machaut and medievalism invite a different way of listening to Birtwistle, just as Birtwistle emphasises the contemporaneity of Machaut.

Conclusion

In an essay detailing the poetics of intertextuality, Ryszard Nycz emphasises that intertextuality is suggestive of an artistic structure not easily reducible to 'perfect' classical, 'original' romantic, or 'new' modernist aesthetics (2005, 17). It is as part of this 'weak ontology' that intertextuality exposes

the ineffability of autonomous or abstract art and its paradoxical status as being both semantically closed and simultaneously ‘having symbols of the past written all over it’ (20).

The poetics of intertextuality and the rubrics of medievalism—their shared anachronistic and paradoxical temporalities—combine in modernist medievalism (British or otherwise). For those composers I have discussed here, Peter Maxwell Davies and Harrison Birtwistle in particular, Nycz’s poetics rings true: though modernist musical discourse has tended to treat their kind of medievalism in terms that support a structuralist account in which the techniques of modern composition realise the unfinished innovations of a medieval precursor, or pastiche and quotation are intertextual only as an ironical response to an otherwise complete work, medievalism, instead, might invite a different sort of reading. The composer of modernist medievalism is doing something less than the literal representation of an ‘authentic’ past than they are entering into a nexus of imaginary (re)representations of a non-contiguous and Other, shared, version of history. The past that medievalism evokes is an intertextual one, its ‘presence’ sustained *across* texts and in listener’s imaginations. Its own paradoxical status, new and old, likewise speaks of something universal, eliding the arbitrary divisions or binarisms that delimit a broader appreciation of modernism’s own vexed temporalities.

References

- Adlington, Robert. 2000. *The Music of Harrison Birtwistle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1965. *Rabelais and His World* (Hélène Iswolsky, trans). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Bent, Margaret. 2003. Words and Music in Machaut’s Motet 9. *Early Music*, 31/3. 363-390.
- Colton, Lisa. 2016. *Angel Song: Medieval English Music in History*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Colton, Lisa. 2020. Past Tense: Creative Medievalism in the Music of Margaret Lucy Wilkins. In Stephen. C. Meyer & Kirsten Yri (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Medievalism* (301-326), New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cross, Jonathan. 1998. *The Stravinsky Legacy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cross, Jonathan. 2000. *Harrison Birtwistle: Man, Mind, Music*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Davies, Peter Maxwell. 1956. The Young British Composer. In Nicholas Jones (2018, ed.), *Peter Maxwell Davies, Selected Writings* (pp. 19-23). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Davies, Peter Maxwell. 1959. Problems of a British Composer Today. In Nicholas Jones (2018, ed.), *Peter Maxwell Davies, Selected Writings* (31-36). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Davies, Peter. Maxwell. 1960. Realizing the ‘Aural Vision’ of *Prolation*. In Nicholas Jones (2018, ed.), *Peter Maxwell Davies, Selected Writings* (pp. 43-45). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Eco, Umberto. 1986. The Return of the Middle Ages (William Weaver, trans.). *Faith in Flakes* (pp.59-85). New London: Secker & Warburg.
- Flanagan, Kevin, ed. 2009. *Ken Russell: Re-viewing England's Last Mannerist*. Lanham: The Scarecrow Press.
- Gloag, Kenneth. 2012. *Postmodernism in Music*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Griffiths, Paul. 2010. *Modern Music and After*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hall, Michael. 1984. *Harrison Birtwistle*. London: Robson.
- Harper-Scott, J. P. E. 2009. Medieval Romance and the Wagner's Musical Narrative in *The Ring*. *19th-Century Music*, 32(3). 211-234.
- Heckert, Deborah. 2020. Hucbald's Fifths and Vaughn Williams's Mass: The New Medieval in Britain between the Wars. In S. C. Meyer & K. Yri (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Medievalism* (pp. 327-349), New York: Oxford University Press.
- Holsinger, Bruce. 2005. *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Henderson, Robert. 1961. Peter Maxwell Davies. *The Musical Times*, 102(1424). 624-626.
- Jones, Chris. 2016. Medievalism in British Poetry. In L. D'Arcens (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism* (pp.14-28). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jones, Nicholas. 2000. Peter Maxwell Davies's 'Submerged Cathedral': Architectural Principles in the Third Symphony. *Music and Letters*, 81/3. 402-432.
- Klein, Micheal L. 2004. *Intertextuality in Western Art Music*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Kolassa, Alexander. 2018. Presentness and the past in contemporary British opera. In James Cook, Alexander Kolassa, and Adam Whittaker (eds.), *Recomposing the Past: Representations of Early Music on Stage and Screen*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Kreutziger-Herr, Annette. 1998. Postmodern Middle Ages: Medieval Music at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century. *Florilegium*, 15. 187-205.
- Leach, Elizabeth Eva. 2011. *Guillaume de Machaut: Secretary, Poet, Musician*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Matthews, David. 2015. *Medievalism: A Critical History*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer.
- Mazo, Margarita. 1990. Stravinsky's "Les Noces" and the Russian Village Wedding Ritual. *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 43(1), 99-142.
- Moortele, Steven Vande. 2013. Form, Narrative and Intertextuality in Wagner's Overture to *Der fliegende Holländer*. *Music Analysis* 32(1). 46-79.
- Nycz, Ryszard. 2005. Intertextual Poetics: Traditions and Outlooks. In M. Tomaszewski and E. Siemdaj (eds.), *Krzysztof Penderecki – music in the intertextual era: studies and interpretation* (pp. 7-20), Krakow: Academia Muzyczna
- O'Hagan, Peter. 2016. 'Alea' and the Concert of the 'Work in Progress'. In E. Campbell and P. O'Hagan (eds.), *Pierre Boulez Studies* (pp. 171-192). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Page, Christopher. 1997. *Discarding Images: Reflections on Music and Culture in Medieval France*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pugh, Tison., & Weisl, Angela Jane. 2013. *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present*. New York: Routledge.
- Robertson, Anne Walters. 2002. *Guillaume de Machaut and Reims: Context and Meaning in his Musical Works*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rupprecht, Philip. 2015a. *British Musical Modernism: The Manchester Group and their Contemporaries*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rupprecht, Philip. 2015b. Mechanical song: Birtwistle's rhythmic imagination. In D. Beard, K. Gloag, and N. Jones (eds.), *Harrison Birtwistle Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Scanlon, Larry. 2010. Modernism's Medieval Imperative: The Hard Lessons of Ezra Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*. *American Literary History*, 22(4). 838-862.

Taruskin, Richard. 1988. The Pastness of the Present and the Presence of the Past. In N. Kenyon (ed.), *Authenticity and Early Music* (pp.137-207). Oxford: Oxford University Press

Ulliot, Jonathan, 2015. *The Medieval Presence in Modernist Literature: The Quest to Fail*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Utz, Richard. 2011. Coming to Terms with Medievalism. *European Journal of English Studies*, 15(2), 101-113.

Wiebe, Heather. 2012. *Britten's Unquiet Pasts: Sound and Memory in Postwar Reconstruction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹ This much is practically the definition of medievalism. Indeed, Eco defines 'medievalism' in part as staging 'a return to the pre-modern in an attempt to diagnose the complexities of the present' (1986, 64). See also Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World* (1965).

² See Matthews 2015.

³ See for example Holsinger 2005.

⁴ Since Eco, the notion that there are, indeed, multiple 'medievalisms' is something of a leitmotif in literature on the subject, recognising the centrality of its multiplicity to the study (see Pugh and Weisl, 2012).

⁵ On the subject of music and cathedrals in the middle ages, see Page 1997.

⁶ The concert programme was as follows: P. Maxwell Davies, *Trumpet Sonata*; A. Goehr, *3 Fantasies for Clarinet and Piano*; E. Lutyens, *Valediction*, Op. 28; A. Webern, *Variations for Piano*, Op. 27; R. Hall, Sonata for 'cello and piano; E. Seidel, *Fantasia for piano*; N. Skalkottas, *Sonatina and Tender Melody* (see Rupprecht, 2015a: 3.)

⁷ I have written elsewhere on this, see Kolassa 2018, 161.

⁸ On medievalism in the opera *Taverner*, see Kolassa 2018.

⁹ A 'supercut' of film scores quoting the Dies irae can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLGa6vfdTIM&feature=youtu.be>

¹⁰ This and his score for another Russell film in the same year are his only two film scores.

¹¹ For more on Ken Russell's aesthetics see Flanagan 2009.

¹² For more on the subject of Davies' interest in realising historical architecture see Jones 2000.