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## The Medievalist Origins of (British) Modernist Music

Alexander Kolassa (*The Open University*)

The Middle Ages—both ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’—has inspired more than a century of ostensibly forward-thinking artistic modernism. A contradiction whose recognition, I contend, might do much to shake up an increasingly tired narrative concerned, principally, with notions ‘progress’ and the breakup of tradition. For musical strains of modernism, specifically, that sense of the ‘medieval’ leaves its enigmatic trace, redolent of a strange dialogue with traditions whose ‘sounds’ are truly lost to time, always mediated by scholarly work, and necessarily imaginary and creative. Medievalism, and its musicological cognate in ‘early music’, therefore, has proven to be veritable wellspring of, among other things, compositional ‘materials’ in the form non-tonal technical innovations, timbres, and forms; it has, likewise, been the catalyst for a range of interdependent aesthetic and ideological positions and responses, both progressive and reactionary, internationalist and nationalist.

Wagner’s adaptation of medieval romance, *Tristan und Isolde* (1865), introduced the world, for example, to a new kind of tonal-instability with the so-called ‘Tristan chord’. A few decades on, and in the years before the Great War, the pagan pre-modern ritual barbarism of early Stravinsky famously inspired riots. Later in the century still, Orff’s medievalist *Carmina Burana* (premiered in 1937) still struggles to shake the fascistic associations of its composer and its success in Nazi Germany. Meanwhile, the Darmstadt School’s (Boulez, Stockhausen, etc.) post-war experiment with hyper-modernism—explicitly ‘new’ and seeking to draw a line between itself and history—contributed to a renewed interest in the technical achievements of composers like Guillaume de Machaut and Philippe de Vitry: programming concerts of early music alongside their own. Dialectically related, then, the story of medievalism is the untold story of modernism. And, in today’s fractious new music scene, these legacies persevere: the past continues to haunt the present in diverse ways. This has, and continues to be, the case for British new music especially.

Britain had been labelled a ‘land without music’ at the turn of the twentieth century, and the legacy of its own stifling musical conservatism has been the central question for recent scholarship

reassessing its role in global musical modernity. In keeping with neo-gothic British fascinations in literature and architecture, ‘medievalism’, it could be said, was an obvious musical ingredient in that time too. And indeed, British composers early in the century sought national renewal through a pastoral and folk-inspired musical language—a movement whose pastoralism prompted the withering label of ‘cowpat’ from a Elisabeth Lutyens, a then rare British arch-modernist with her own brand of medievalism. Notwithstanding a few notable examples in the interim, however, it was not until a post-war generation of composers—inspired by what they saw in Darmstadt—forged a progressive musical language self-consciously opposed to cowpat conservatism, that a challenging and modern form of medievalism fitting to its radical rubrics of anachronism, asynchrony, and co-temporality came to define new British music.

Composers of the so-called ‘Manchester School’, including Harrison Birtwistle and Peter Maxwell Davies, rejected a conservative musical establishment, rebelling against sonata form by returning to little known medieval manuscripts. And, indeed, medieval musical palindromes and plainchant rows were able to serve the progressive goals of a music uninterested in the strict hierarchies of Enlightenment tonality. By the end of the 1960s these composers were in close convergence with the better understood popular medievalism of the folk revival, television, or film: staging transgressive musical theatrical works and opera with medieval themes, costumes, shawms and sackbuts. That interest has remained a lifelong one for both composers, and even today anachronistic medievalism is something of an institution among young composers with modernistic or avant-garde ambitions. British modernist medievalism of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries reached something of an apotheosis in George Benjamin’s extraordinarily successful opera *Written on Skin* (2012): a reimagining of a thirteenth-century troubadour text, and a dramatization of historiography itself.

Modern and medieval music both occupied marginal positions on either side of a grand ‘canon’ of musical works, and in the twentieth century this imbues them with something that is equally transgressive and new. The aesthetic, sonic, and cultural continuities, then, are very real ones, and my brief alternate history of modernist medievalism—in Britain and elsewhere—showcases the natural convergence of the very *now* in music and a distant, medieval, past.