The story goes that when the twenty-year old Brahms visited Liszt in Weimar in 1853, Liszt effortlessly sight-read the younger man’s piano Sonata in C major (a work of considerable technical difficulty). Brahms was astounded by this feat of consummate musicianship. However, when Liszt then played his own, as yet unpublished, B minor Sonata, Brahms fell asleep. Liszt probably understood that the young composer was tired after his long journey, and of course the story may be apocryphal, but nevertheless the fact that they never met again may be read as a metaphor for a divergence of musical tendencies that came to characterise nineteenth-century high art music. Some describe this as ‘the war of the Romantics’, a bitter dispute between the New German School (principal figures, Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner) and traditionalists, such as Brahms, whose work was deemed old-fashioned. It was a spat that embroiled the whole of musical Europe.

Liszt and Brahms were both Romantics but whereas Brahms was conservative, stylistically and harmonically – Hans von Bülow, the musico-political spokesman of the New German School, would describe his first symphony as ‘Beethoven’s Tenth’ – Liszt could be disorientating and daring on both fronts. For example it was Liszt who perfected the development of significantly longer formal structures solely through the metamorphosis of themes: by subjecting a leitmotiv to a variety of permutations both rhythmic and intervallic, he preserved a unity within variety and vice versa. The provision of such a unity had also been the architectural role of sonata form within the Classical symphony, but whereas that had been more suited to the characteristics of absolute music – or music unrelated to pictorial or poetic suggestion – Liszt’s structures, epitomised by his B minor piano Sonata and his symphonic poems, gave the theme developmental possibilities more akin to cellular mitosis and centred on a belief in feelings and emotions – in short, a belief in the power of ‘the sublime’.

Within these new structural forms Romantic expression was given further freedom by the dismantling of tonality. Tonality is based on scales. An octave can be divided into twelve notes, each a semitone apart. If you play them one after the other, the result is chromatic – a scale in semitones without a home key. However in the scales of Western music from the time of Bach, seven notes are used to make up the ‘major’ and ‘minor’ scales and the intervals between them are not always semitones. In this arrangement the result is diatonic – the scales assume a ‘home’ key and, therefore, a sense of resolution when a chord based on the fifth note of the scale (the ‘dominant’) is followed by one based on the first note (the ‘tonic’). The simple consonance of this tonic–dominant relationship is the basis of every simple nursery-rhyme tune. Within this tonal system, more piquant harmonies, or dissonances, are used for effect – indeed the expressive role of dissonance as part of an opposition (consonance–dissonance) was the basis for expression in music in the West up until the time of Schönberg and...
The mystery of Modern dissonance

Peter Bradley-Fulgoni

The firmament of high art music at the time of Schönberg and his followers, the great upheaval apropos of harmony, form and structure caused a cataclysmic revolution, the consequences of which resound to the present.

Many years on from my first recital performances of works by ‘Moderns’ such as Schönberg, Berg, Gerhard and Di Gesu, such music can still be met with suspicion and hostility, as if seen as a misstep in an otherwise jolly tonal romp. But Schönberg, for example, rejected the idea of tonality not as a concerted intellectual experiment but as an organic evolution of musical expression: for him, a new palette of emotions could only be expressed within the parameters of a new musical order; indeed, the emotional intensity of works by all the composers of the Second Viennese School (Schönberg, Webern, Berg and Gerhard) would be incomprehensible if offset against a background of traditional diatonic harmony. It was Expressionism – and their disillusionment in the aftermath of the First World War would compound feelings of fragmentation and alienation that they transferred to their music. Schönberg’s piano works Opus 11 and 19 belong to his own highly creative Expressionist period (1908–11) – a time also considered ‘stylistically and harmonically disorientating and daring’

... and Schönberg’s comment: the first line of Mäßige, from his Drei Klavierstücke, Opus 11
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Massimo Di Gesu: an extract from the manuscript of ‘Through a glass...’, 2001

‘Di Gesu’s music reconnects with the Second Viennese School’

Arnold Schönberg, shown on an Austrian stamp of 1974 ( engraver and designer, Otto Stefferl)

to be his most controversial since, curiously, his later ‘serialism’, pursued and perfected by his pupil, Webern, has become a more normal aspect of today’s musical acceptance as exemplified by the work of Pierre Boulez.

There were other significant voices. The work of Hindemith in the 1920s, for example, had an unconstrained dissonance that, in Glenn Gould’s words ‘gave way in the 1930s to a determination to bring dissonance to heel in the interests of structural cohesion’. In the Dritte Sonate für Klavier (1936) with its amazing triple fugue finale, redolent of the ecstatic polyphony of J. S. Bach, we have an undisputed masterpiece as well as, perhaps, an ascetic balance between the old and new orders.

These composers, whose work is essential in any discussion of Modern high art music, are referenced by Massimo Di Gesu. His music has a unique tonal language traceable to Schönberg, and in that way it represents a breath of fresh air in the doldrums of ‘contemporary music’ malaise. His reconnection with the Second Viennese School eschews fashion, rejects Post-Modernism and adopts an exclusively atonal idiom; moreover it is characterised by the search for a gravitational pull that links the elements of the music narrative so that these can sound as much as possible ‘necessary’ to one another. There is a hint here of Beethoven’s motto, written in the score of his Opus 135 string quartet: Es muss sein (it must be); the co-ordinates of this particular ‘necessity’ are found in his harmony (where he focuses on a circular system of eight-note chords suggestive of Scriabin’s multi-altered dominants) and in his counterpoint (where he refers to the way both Schönberg and Strauss re-thought Bach’s principle of dynamic magnification through melodic-rhythmic contrast).

The war of the Romantics was not fought without occasional instances of a truce. In his memoirs, the great Scottish pianist Frederic Lamond, who studied with Liszt, retells the story of a musical get-together in Vienna where Brahms, the traditionalist, played from the manuscript of his Variations on a Theme of Handel while Wagner, the trail-blazer, sat at the piano beside him: ‘When the composer finished [Wagner] spoke the remarkable words: “I would never have thought it possible to compose such Variations after Beethoven.” A few days later Wagner sent to Brahms a copy of the Rhinegold, bound in gold.’ One might say that the factions were reconciled. Schönberg himself played a part in this: he sought to reconcile Brahmsian formal lineaments with Wagnerian chromaticism in his (tonal) Verklärte Nacht of 1899. His subsequent transfigurations of harmony, form and structure are aspects of the vibrant spirit of Modernism. The tensions within that shift are ones that composers such as Di Gesu embrace, pianists like myself recreate, and the public ...?

Peter Bradley-Fulgoni’s previous essays for arq on J. S. Bach’s forty-eight preludes and fugues and on Beethoven’s piano sonatas were published in arq 10/3+4 and 14/4. His latest recording of music of, and around, the twentieth century from late Liszt to Di Gesu and entitled PianOLYPHONY, is on the Foxglove Audio label (Fox 091). Future engagements include a concert tour of Russia at the behest of the Richter Foundation where, among other things, he will perform the Schönberg piano concerto and a new piano concerto by Di Gesu.

Photo: Peter Bradley-Fulgoni after a recital at the Sviatoslav Richter Memorial Apartment, Moscow, 2008.