

Peter Bradley-Fulgoni



'not a concerted intellectual experiment, but an organic evolution of musical expression'

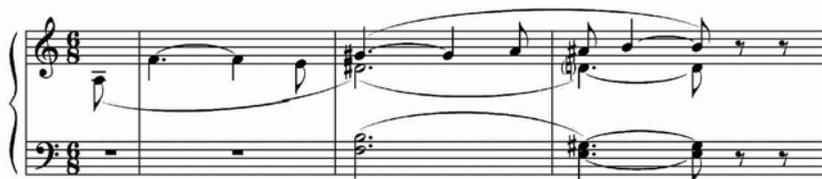
The mystery of Modern dissonance

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 However, when Liszt then played his own, as yet unpublished, B minor Sonata, Brahms fell asleep.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 described as *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



Poly-dimensional: the introduction to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* (showing the 'Tristan chord' in bar 2) ...

'stylistically and harmonically disorientating and daring'



... and Schönberg's comment: the first line of *Mäßige*, from his *Drei Klavierstücke*, Opus 11

the Second Viennese School in the early twentieth century.

In the works of Liszt and Wagner, a re-definition of tonal resolution engendered a sort of emancipated idea of consonance. The daring harmonic progressions of Wagner are exemplified by the so-called 'Tristan chord' in the opening phrase of his opera *Tristan und Isolde* of 1865. Often pinpointed as the genesis of this essentially Modernist idea, its poly-dimensional nature enables it to be contextualized in a multiplicity of tonal contexts – or none. Liszt, too, pursued the logical inference of tonal dissolution to the point where the opening motif in his experimental and prescient late piano piece *Nuages Gris* of 1881, could be re-presented intervallically as the opening of Berg's piano Sonata Opus 1 – a work whose conception of tonality hints at a pure chromaticism reminiscent of Wagner.

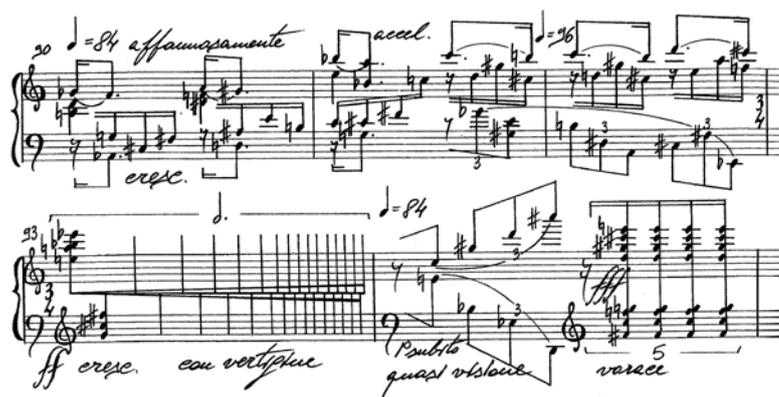
The denser the chromaticism, the more the tonal centre – the sense of tonal stability – is obscured. But it is Arnold Schönberg who developed this line of thought to the point where each of the twelve notes of the chromatic scale is given equal importance – an independence that provides no over-riding sense of key. Thus is Schönberg considered the inventor of atonality. If, in the words of one

commentator, he was 'the ravisher of the listener's ear', it was not a crime that went unnoticed: there was shouting during the first performance of his second String Quartet in 1908 and public protests afterwards, even as critics rushed to declare the composer insane.

This 'Schönberg scandal', as it was called, was part of a wider historical picture on an increasingly international scale. One may think of radical composition such as Scriabin's creation of an atonality independent of Schönberg (especially in the late piano sonatas written after 1911) and Debussy's experimentalism (for example in his second set of piano preludes of 1913); then there was the infamous reaction to Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* at its first performance in 1913 when police had to be called to quell a riot. In the visual arts, too, hostility was shown towards the work of Matisse (in 1905, a critic repeated Ruskin's words on Whistler: 'a pot of paint flung in the public's face'), Picasso and Braque created a sensation by their '*bizarreries cubiques*', and the intensifying gloom of the infra-world of German Expressionist painting and drama compounded the sense of shock.

Even nowadays the idea of such Modern dissonance is shrouded in mystery. It could be said that in 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



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 Steffler)

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-rhythmical 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.