

*Revisiting the Historiography of Postwar Avant-Garde Music*, a cura di Anne-Sylvie Barthel-Calvet e Christopher Brent Murray, London - New York, Routledge, 2023, 199 pages.

The European musical avant-garde after 1945 is a complex subject for contemporary musicology. Largely unknown to the general public and idolised by an older generation of music critics, the artists and the very concept of the avant-garde have been subject to critical deconstruction by New Musicology in recent decades. Against this backdrop, Anne-Sylvie Barthel-Calvet and Christopher Brent Murray have compiled a collection of texts that revisit our understanding of this movement. Rather than deconstructing the avant-garde from the 'outside' – that is, demystifying it through sociological, anthropological, cultural-historical, or ethnomusicological contextualisation – the authors aim to reconsider and expand upon this musical historical moment from 'inside', i.e. by studying archival material to reconstruct the genesis of works and statements from the complex networks in which the artists were working.

However, the contrast between inside-out and outside-in is less stark when reading the in-depth studies that the book brings together. Pascal Decroupet critically analyses the discursive self-historisation of Boulez, Stockhausen, Pousseur and Nono in light of their musical production; Jean-François Trubert scrutinises the astonishing reception history of Kagel's text on instrumental theatre; Christopher B. Murray traces the actual authors of the melodies Messiaen found in missionary ethnography and incorporated as 'primitive', 'Papuan' songs in his *Île de Feu*; Tiffany Kuo studies the economic background of Berio's American career, focusing on the role of the Rockefeller Foundation; Anne-Sylvie Barthel-Calvet uncovers Xenakis's involvement with and reliance on the Gravesano circle of information theorists; and Jonathan Goldman carefully examines the technical conditions of indeterminate composition, relating their emphasis on the non-fixity of the work to the unalterable nature of recording. In short, studying the avant-garde from the inside means going far beyond the sketches and scores of the archive.

Two brilliant texts frame this collection of independent studies: Martin Kaltenecker's reflection on the historiography of 20<sup>th</sup> century music and Pascal Decroupet's attempt to sketch an alternative narrative of the avantgarde focussing on the increasing importance of zooming-in on sounds. Kaltenecker starts from two failures in historiography: either the *petitio principii* of a grand narrative guiding the selection of events that are supposed to justify it, or the relativistic incoherence of all the incompatible micro-stories that can be told. Kaltenecker's text is centred on a devastating critique of Taruskin's grand narrative of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which motivates his own approach as a third way: thinking history in constellations. Drawing on Rutherford-Johnson's *Music After the Fall* (Oakland, University of California Press, 2017), among other sources, he identifies a constellation of predominant themes in music (continuity, live

electronics, corporeality, technophilia, alliance with images, performance space and listening) which emerge in the 1970s and express a general tendency towards *sound* composition (in contrast to modern *complexity* and premodern *mimesis*) as the paradigm of contemporary music. Decroupet agrees with this diagnosis when he retells the history of the avantgarde from Varèse to Grisey (thereby following Makis Solomos' *From Music to Sound*, London – New York, Routledge, 2020). It is characterized by a transformation of the musical material through the increasing compositional study of the “inner life of sounds” (p. 187) as complexes of timbral and morphological qualities. Such a “sonal” historiography of music, it seems to me, also has the potential to expand the notion of avant-garde beyond the established figures of the European New Music.

CHRISTOPH HAFFTER  
*christoph.haffter@fhnw.ch*