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## MUSIC

# Beyond the Musical Avant-Garde

*Terry Teachout*

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WHAT REALLY happened to classical music in the 20th century? The survey histories of modern music that were published in the 1960's mostly took for granted the historical inevitability and ultimate triumph of atonality and the postwar avant-garde. But history, as it is wont to do, went in a different direction.

By century's end, it was clear that there had been nothing inevitable about those two stylistic developments, neither of which was embraced by audiences or performers. Today they are, if not exactly forgotten, then ignored by a new generation of classical composers who have other priorities. The American minimalist composer Philip Glass spoke for many in dismissing the European avant-garde as "a wasteland, dominated by these maniacs, these creeps, who were trying to make everyone write this crazy creepy music."

Historians, not surprisingly, are still sorting out the collapse of the

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TERRY TEACHOUT, COMMENTARY's regular music critic and the drama critic of the Wall Street Journal, is writing *Hotter Than That: A Life of Louis Armstrong*. He blogs about the arts at [www.terryteachout.com](http://www.terryteachout.com).

avant-garde, and so most of the new "narratives" of musical modernism have been less descriptive of what was than prescriptive statements defending what the critic happens to consider desirable. If, as has been said, history is written by the victors, then critics are seeking to rewrite the history of 20th-century classical music so as to make it accord with their particular beliefs about the relative significance of its major figures.

Alex Ross, the music critic of the *New Yorker*, has approached the task in a different way in his new book, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the 20th Century*.\* As he writes in the preface:

Histories of music since 1900 often take the form of a teleological tale, a goal-obsessed narrative full of great leaps forward and heroic battles with the philistine bourgeoisie. When the concept of progress assumes exaggerated importance, many works are struck from the historical record on the grounds that they have nothing new to say. These pieces often happen to be those that have found a broader public. . . . Two distinct repertoires have formed, one intellectual and one popular. Here [in this book] they are merged: no language is con-

sidered more intrinsically modern than any other.

The result is a volume sharply different in tone from its predecessors—and truer, in my view, to the history of musical modernism.

IT IS NOT that Ross is "non-judgmental," as the current shibboleth would have it. In *The Rest Is Noise*, he leaves no doubt of his personal priorities. He devotes much space, for example, to composers like Aaron Copland and Jean Sibelius who were long undervalued by critics and historians because their music failed to accord with prevailing notions of the "progressive."

On the other hand, Ross's taste is both wide-ranging and receptive, and he never makes the inverse error of assuming that a piece of music is bad merely because it does not sound like Copland or Sibelius, or because it is inconsistent with some other theory of modernism. Insofar as it is possible to do so, he takes music as it comes, and is open to the possibility that any kind—even the atonal kind—can be good.

Needless to say, criticism is judg-

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\* Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 624 pp., \$30.00.

ment first and foremost, and part of what makes *The Rest Is Noise* compelling is the fact that so many of its critical judgments are convincing. Time and again Ross puts his finger unerringly on the pulse of a composer or a specific work, summing it up with the pithy brevity of a first-class journalist.\*

No less striking is his willingness to engage with musical modernism as a part of the larger world of both culture and politics. Accordingly, his frame of reference is unusually wide—and, for the most part, unusually clear-eyed.

The key figure of *The Rest Is Noise*, for instance, is not a real person but a fictional character. Adrian Leverkühn, the tortured anti-hero of Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus* (1947), is for Ross the most telling symbol of what, under the pressure of totalitarian politics, had happened to classical music at mid-century. As he reminds us, Leverkühn is "a modern composer [who] produces esoteric masterpieces and then descends into syphilitic insanity," and his terrible fate is offered by Mann as a symbolic account of the rise and fall of German art and culture.

In Ross's words:

Leverkühn is an intellectual monster—cold, loveless, arrogant, mocking. His music absorbs all styles of the past and shatters them into fragments. . . . Since *Faustus* is also a book about the roots of Nazism, Leverkühn's "bloodless intellectuality" becomes, in a cryptic way, the mirror image of Hitler's "bloody barbarism." The cultish fanaticism of modern art turns out to be not unrelated to the politics of fascism: both attempt to remake the world in utopian forms.

This anti-utopian declaration suggests the extent to which Ross has freed himself from the constricting and politically-tinged idea of aesthetic progress. To be sure, he himself is not a conservative, and in fact his description of the anti-Communist movement in postwar

America is marred by an uncritical acceptance of the clichés of the political Left. It is far too simple-minded—too cute, really—to insinuate as Ross does that the hermetic musical modernism of the 50's and 60's in America was in some fundamental sense the emanation of an anti-Communist impulse: "Milton Babbitt, the emblematic cold-war composer, produced [serial] music so byzantine in construction that one practically needed a security clearance to understand it."

At the same time, though, Ross is forthright about the horrors of life under Communism—so much so that he even criticizes Copland for having played "naïve ideological games" in his music with the American Communist party. His final verdict on the 30's is likewise unsparring. "The period from the mid-30's onward," he writes,

marked the onset of the most warped and tragic phase in 20th-century music: the total politicizing of the art by totalitarian means. . . . Not only did composers fail to rise up en masse against totalitarianism, but many actively welcomed it.†

ONE SHOULD not expect too much from a historian, and so I am not troubled by the fact that Ross's tastes in contemporary classical music—he writes with special enthusiasm about the work of John Adams and Thomas Adès—do not closely resemble my own.

Far more important, in my view, is his overall recognition of the need for contemporary composers to forge stylistic languages (if not a language) that will be accessible to the common listener. This theme, which permeates the pages of *The Rest Is Noise*, is first sounded in Ross's discussion of the emergence just prior to World War I of the "New Viennese School" of hermetic modernists led by Arnold Schoenberg: "Fin-de-siècle Vienna offers the depressing spectacle of artists and audiences washing their

hands of each other, giving up on the dream of common ground."

Not so Ross, who is in the best sense of the phrase a cultural democrat. "Mainstream audiences may lag behind the intellectual classes in appreciating the more adventurous composers," he writes apropos of Sibelius, "but sometimes they are quicker to perceive the value of music that the politicians of style fail to comprehend."

Yet he recognizes no less clearly that the continuing health of the culture of classical music depends on its ability to incorporate and popularize new ideas. In America between the wars, Ross rightly observes,

the failure to support the new led inexorably to the decline of classical music as a popular pastime, for nothing bound it to contemporary life. A venerable art form was set to become one more passing fad in a ravenous consumer culture.

Ross's grasp of the similar problem facing today's classical composers is a large part of what makes *The Rest Is Noise* so valuable. When he remarks approvingly that Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* "took back the cultural middle ground that [George] Gershwin had colonized in the 20's and 30's," he makes clear his own belief that there is still a place for classical music in our popular culture. Thus, it is no accident that he has singled out for

\* I especially like his description of the opening of Copland's *Billy the Kid*: "Woodwind figures in rough-hewn parallel fifths cut across an emptied-out musical space, conjuring the picture of a wagon train moving across some long, dusty valley of the West. Yet the music comes straight out of the Parisian Stravinsky. The keening lines for high clarinets and low oboes echo the 'Spring Rounds' section of the *Rite of Spring*, as do the folkish grace notes that are added later."

† Notable in this connection is Anton Webern's hysterical paean to Adolf Hitler, tellingly cited by Ross: "This is exactly the *new state*, for which the seed was already laid twenty years ago. Yes, a *new state it is*, one that has never existed before!! *It is something new!* Created by this unique man!!!. . . *Each day becomes more exciting.* I see such a good future. It will be different also for me."

extended discussion Sibelius, Copland, and Benjamin Britten, the last of whom he puts forward as an exemplary figure. Britten's desire to communicate with the largest possible audience of potential listeners was, for Ross, part and parcel of his greatness:

Britten provocatively compared the regimentation of culture in totalitarian states to the self-imposed regimentation of the avant-garde in democratic countries. Any ideological organization of music, he said, distorts a composer's natural voice, his "gift and personality." Everything about Britten's style—his deliberate parochialism, his tonal orientation, his preference for classical forms—went against the grain of the postwar era.

MOST INTERESTING of all is the optimism with which Ross portrays the contemporary music scene. This optimism is by no means unrealistic, for he is well aware of the extent to which, as I recently wrote, our

culture has "withdrawn its attention from classical music."\*

Over the course of the last century, Ross observes in the final chapter of *The Rest Is Noise*, the art of classical composition

experienced what can only be described as a fall from a great height. At the beginning of the 20th century, composers were cynosures on the world stage, their premieres mobbed by curiosity seekers. . . . A hundred years on, contemporary classical composers have largely vanished from the radar screen of mainstream culture.

Yet it is also true, as Ross points out, that classical music "is reaching far larger audiences than it has at any time in history," and that the rise of the new digital media offers classical musicians a new way to reach out to "subcultures and niche markets."

It may well be that the institutional life of classical music in the 21st century will not be centered on such time-honored institutions as big-city symphony orchestras and

opera companies. But this does not necessarily mean it will be inferior in quality to that which came before. What will matter more is whether the classical composers of today and tomorrow succeed in developing new styles to which new audiences can respond wholeheartedly.

Ross, if I read him right, believes that the future of classical music lies in an all-embracing eclecticism. It remains to be seen whether or not such eclecticism is capable of solving the problem to which the Hungarian composer György Ligeti alluded in 1993 when he complained that "I am in a prison: one wall is the avant-garde, the other wall is the past, and I want to escape." But when it comes to matters of art, the end, which is beauty, is always more important than the means. In *The Rest Is Noise*, Alex Ross shows himself to be a surpassingly eloquent advocate for beauty, by any means necessary.

\* "Selling Classical Music" (COMMENTARY, September 2007).



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